

THE CANARY

Written by

Karl Herrmann

FADE IN:

1

EXT. CREEK - DAY

1

CLOSE ON ORVILLE COMBS, a youthful, handsome, bearded man in determined pursuit of his destiny, which in California in this year of our Lord means one thing: GOLD.

SPLASH. CLOSE ON a metal gold pan plunging into the creek. Hands lift, shake, sift through silt and muck.

CLOSE ON mud caked boots, khaki overalls, and piles of discarded loam.

WIDE NOW to find we're on a rippling, flowing creek reflecting the bright blue sky and California sun. Orville squats at the creek's edge, sunburnt and drenched in sweat, his hands blistered and waterlogged. Orville isn't "simple," but he is earnest and a little naive.

LEMUEL, an older prospector, chats with Orville from across the creek. Lemuel seems harmless enough despite the glint of a shiny GOLD TOOTH when he smiles.

LEMUEL

Horace Orson's dropped his price
for that mine on Red Hill again.
Only asking two hundred square.

ORVILLE

That's still a lot 'a money for a
claim you don't know nothing
certain of.

LEMUEL

You know, what I'm certain of,
Orville? I didn't pay Commodore
Vanderbilt half my last year's
wages, and you didn't move that
wife of yours 'cross this whole
darned country to squat in the mud
like a Chinaman.

RACK TO a CHINESE PROSPECTOR casting Lemuel a disapproving look. Lemuel thinks nothing of it. Orville covers...

ORVILLE

There's things worse than a
Chinaman, Lemuel. Getting skinned
by my wife for one.

LEMUEL

You think Scotty Webb's wife
skinned him for buying that mine
off big gulch? No sir! She's too
busy sipping tea in San Francisco.

Orville stands to stretch his legs and wipe his brow. The
midday sun beats down something fierce.

LEMUEL (O.S.) (CONT'D)

San-Fran-cis-co! Love that ring!
(beat)
Now dont-cha?

Orville refocuses his attention to Lemuel--

ORVILLE

What's that?

LEMUEL

Orville, you better listen, 'cause
I'll tell you what for. If old
archangel Michael hadn't knocked on
my door a couple times already, I'd
go down and get that booty myself.
But I ain't eager to let him in
just yet. Now, I said it afore and
my offer stands: I'll stake you
half of Horace Orson's price long
as you treat me fair.

ORVILLE

I don't know, Lemuel...I'll think
on it.

LEMUEL

You do that. Think-and-think-and-
think, and then one day you'll stop
thinking and you'll look just like
me. Old. The money's in the
mountain, Orville. I can feel it.
Yes, sir.

Orville gets back to work. And now, as if fate were mocking
him, he finds a tiny, solitary spec of GOLD gleaming up
amidst the dregs of his pan. Not much for a hard day's work.

3 EXT. BODIE - DAY 3

Sunset paints this California Gold Rush town yellow, orange and red. A single dirt road runs past a Church and a Saloon. Farther on, saltbox homes bake beneath the mountains of sunbaked chaparral.

Orville pauses at the edge of main street and casts his gaze towards the mountainside. Lemuel's offer weighs heavy on his mind. Hiking his pack a little higher, Orville starts off towards the mountain.

3B - EXT. BODIE - MOUNTAINS - DAY - 3B

Orville walks past a beautiful mountain range.

4 EXT. MINE - MAGIC HOUR 4

CLOSE ON a low-slung mine shaft cut into the rock face. WIND whips from inside. PULL BACK to reveal Orville staring into the black abyss, pondering the treasure it may hold.

5 EXT. BODIE - NIGHT 5

Orville plods down main street to a one room house on the outskirts of town.

6 EXT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT 6

Orville peers through the front window. Inside, his wife, EMALINE, lets her hair down as she gets ready for bed. Orville smiles. Coming home to her is his favorite time of day.

7 INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT 7

Clad in a simple nightgown, Emaline sits in bed reading the bible by candlelight. She peers suspiciously at Orville as he washes his face and towels it dry.

EMALINE

Long day...

Orville grunts in acknowledgement. Emaline shuts the bible and continues to study him.

ORVILLE

I feel those eyes of yours.

EMALINE

What these?

She bats them at him teasingly.

ORVILLE

Awful scandalous you flirtin' like that--a married woman n' all. Be a terrible shame if your husband found out.

EMALINE

Oh, I think he'd abide.

Orville laughs as he steps out of his pants and climbs in bed with her.

8

INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

8

Orville tries to sneak a kiss. Emaline turns away.

EMALINE

Funny hearing 'bout "scandal" from a husband who came home past his suppertime.

Orville knows she won't quit until he fesses up.

ORVILLE

Horace Orson's dropped his price to two hundred for that mine on Red Hill. Lemuel says he'll stake me half if I do the digging.

EMALINE

That's all fine and well, Orville, but we only got a couple hundred saved up, and winter's on the way.

ORVILLE

Why do you think I hiked all the way up there after all day working? Ain't enough going on down at the creek no more. Got to find another way.

EMALINE

That mine's no good and you know it. Why don't you go ask Abel Baxter's widow about it.

ORVILLE

Don't tell me 'bout Abel Baxter.
Man pro'lly drank himself to death
down there. How 'bout you tell me
where Theo Fletcher's at? How 'bout
Scotty Webb? Where are they? Not
squatting in some creek all the
live-long-day I'll tell you that
much. They knew! The money's in the
mountains!

Emaline can see how frustrated Orville is. She holds his face
and strokes his beard.

EMALINE

Lots of little bits add up to make
a lot. That's what you said to me.

ORVILLE

The little bits is too small now,
and there aren't enough of'em. Way
things is goin' we should have
stayed in Cincinnati.

It pains her to crush his spirit, but--

EMALINE

You're a good man, Orville Combs,
but you know what happens to a
widow in a town like this. You're
no good to me dead.

She kisses him playfully to drive the point home.

ORVILLE

You're right. 'Course you're right.

EMALINE

You tell Lemuel, "Thank you, but no
thank you."

(beat)

Alright...?

ORVILLE

Yeah.

Emaline lays her head on Orville's chest as he looks on torn.

Orville is back at it, panning for gold in the muck.

As Lemuel arrives he gives Orville a shout and a wave. Orville waves back and sullenly shakes his head, "no." Lemuel nods in acceptance, but is clearly disappointed.

10 EXT. BODIE - DAY 10

Orville walks home down main street, giving the mountains a regretful look.

11 INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT 11

Orville eats dinner with Emaline, forcing a smile as she tells him about her day.

12 EXT. CREEK - DAY 12

Orville works hard at the creek, now wearing a wool jacket as winter approaches. His face looks angry as he plunges the pan into the water.

13 EXT. BODIE - DAY 13

Winter has come. Snow blankets the town.

Orville walks home exhausted, pulling his jacket tight to keep out the cold.

14 INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT 14

Orville lies in bed with Emaline, wrestling with regret. She rolls over and nuzzles his neck tenderly, and we see his face soften. He kisses her forehead, finally accepting this fate.

15 EXT. CREEK - DAY 15

Spring has come. The sun has returned and the snow has melted.

Orville looks happy as he picks a couple reasonably sized pieces of gold from his sieve.

16 EXT. BODIE - DAY 16

Spring has come. The sun has returned and the snow has melted.

ORVILLE
 (calls to Emaline)
 I'm heading out.

Emaline comes to the front door looking none too pleased. She gives Orville a kiss, then goes back inside and shuts the door.

Orville is struck by a pang of guilt, and for a moment considers not going forward with his plan. But the CHIRPING of the canary lifts his spirits and reminds him of the opportunity ahead.

22 EXT. MINE - DAY 22

Orville stares into the pitch black mouth of the cave with trepidation. This is the point of no return. Drumming up his courage, Orville sets off into the mine.

23 INT. MINE - MOUTH - DAY 23

IN THE DARKNESS ORVILLE STRIKES A MATCH and lights a LANTERN. An orange glow is cast about the mine as Orville peers into the abyss.

PEEP-PEEP, the Canary chirps as Orville begins his descent.

Orville ventures deeper and deeper into the mine, scanning the walls for hints of gold. Only the muted hues of plain old rock stare back at him.

24 INT. MINE - MIDDLE - SAME 24

Orville looks back towards the mouth of the cave, but it's no longer in sight. Here, the air grows still but for the SHUFFLING of Orville's feet and CHIRPING of the Canary. The eeriness isn't lost on Orville, and he decides to stop and try his luck with the pickaxe before descending any further.

Orville grips the pickaxe and brings it to bear against the mine wall, loosing chunks of rock. He pauses for a moment to assess the air. The Canary CHIRPS reassuringly. Orville continues digging and quickly amasses a small pile of rocks.

Orville crouches to inspect his yield. It fails to evince a golden sheen. He decides to forge ahead.

Further on, Orville digs at the cavern walls again to no avail. Pile after pile and still no gold. The work is grueling and at first Orville refuses to give up. But time passes, and Orville's energies wane.

Inevitably frustration rears it's ugly head; anger turns, to despair, and to defeat.

Palms bloodied, muscles raw, lunges aflame, Orville lets the axe slip from his grasp. He falls to his knees and weeps. His SOBS resound throughout the mine but there is no one here to console him.

The Canary's bright song offers some small solace though; it's just enough to spur Orville onward. He accepts his predicament and rather than pity himself any longer, he stands and rips off a piece of his shirt to bandage his bloody hands.

25

INT. MINE - DEEP - SAME

25

Nerves steeled, Orville forges deeper into the mine, settling on yet another spot to try his luck. Gritting his teeth to block out the pain of his hands, he attacks the rock anew with an intensity bordering on possession. He doesn't seem to notice the rapid quickening of his BREATHES nor the increasingly DISTORTED REVERBERATION of the pickaxe as it impacts the rock wall and leaves the air BUZZING. Only when the air becomes so thick with dust that Orville HACKS and COUGHS does he pause long enough to notice the slightest glimmer atop the rock pile at his feet. He grabs a rock and holds it close to the lamp: GOLD.

Orville WHOOPS and HOLLERS, a crazed joy on his face. He inspects the other rocks at his feet. MORE GOLD. Orville YELPS with glee, unaware of the eerie way his voice ECHOES a little too long. He hurriedly stuffs as many rocks as will fit into his canvas satchel, unaware of how his body moves semi-drunkenly. But when he turns to go and staggers dizzily, nearly falling, he realizes something is WRONG. In the still of the cave, he hears a quiet HISS coming from a crack in the wall.

Orville shakes off the dizziness and suddenly realizes how deathly quiet the mine is. Waving the lamp about, he scours the shadows for the Canary, but it's not here. A panic grips him. He hurriedly grabs his supplies, and his satchel of gold, and starts the upward climb.

26

INT. MINE - MIDDLE - SAME

26

The going is slow. The pickaxe and the gold are heavy. The noxious gas is suffocating. Orville clumsily ditches the axe in order to pick up his pace. Soon after, the lamp's light flits across a rock pile and then the bars of the Canary's cage. Inside, the Canary lies dead.

ORVILLE

No...no--no--no--no.

Face-to-face with the dead Canary, Orville stifles a sob, the magnitude of his peril hitting home. In a panic, his breathes become shallow and quick, flooding his lungs with gas fumes. He grits his teeth and cries out in pain as another wave of dizziness sweeps over him. He lumbers to his feet and climbs on, struggling to stay conscious. Every step becomes a painful hardship. Every breathe a gasp.

His foot trips on a rock. He falls. SMASHES the lantern, and plunges the mine into DARKNESS. Orville CRIES and CRAWLS through the darkness, his JAGGED BREATHES ECHOING in the dark.

27 INT. MINE - MOUTH - SAME 27

Finally, the faintest glimmer of light dances across Orville's face. His eyes, listless and glassy, look up from the shadows towards the mouth of the cave to find MOONLIGHT and the faintest breeze blowing his hair.

Orville wills himself to stand and cinches the satchel of gold tighter on his back.

28 EXT. MINE - NIGHT 28

Orville emerges from the mine and inhales the fresh air. Relishing his success, he WHOOPS with delight.

29 EXT. BODIE - NIGHT 29

All is quiet on main street as Orville passes through town, a victorious smile on his face.

30 EXT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT 30

A lone candle burns in the window as Orville approaches. He smiles and quickens his pace.

ORVILLE

Emaline!...Emaline!

He climbs the steps of the porch and--

31 INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

31

Orville barges through the front door, startling Emaline as she stitches a pair of his socks.

EMALINE
Orville!

ORVILLE
I did it, Em! Look'ere!

Orville hurriedly unties the satchel and shows Emaline a shimmering golden rock.

EMALINE
(astonished)
Gold...

ORVILLE
A whole mine-full!

EMALINE
We did it...?

Emaline lifts her gaze, and for a FLASH she looks like a corpse. Her eyes are MILKY, and her skin is DECAYED.

Orville YELLS and recoils. He turns towards the door only to find Emaline standing smack dab in front him. He SCREAMS again. She looks normal now but how did she get to the other side of the room? Orville can't make sense of it.

EMALINE (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

ORVILLE
You were--I was--I feel dizzy...

EMALINE
Come sit.

Emaline helps Orville to the bed and sits beside him. She feels his forehead for a fever.

EMALINE (CONT'D)
You're burning up.

ORVILLE
I'm just...tired.

EMALINE
You work too hard. Not any more though. Never again!

She kisses him. He closes his eyes and gives in to it. A wave of relief washes over him.

But then he senses something is wrong. He opens his eyes to find he's kissing Emaline's decayed, lifeless corpse.

Orville SCREAMS as Emaline slumps into him. Utterly terrified, Orville leaps up. Emaline's lifeless body starts to fall but he catches it and sets it in the chair.

He stares into her lifeless eyes not wanting to believe it.

ORVILLE

Emaline...?

Orville gently touches her face. But there is no bringing her back. He starts to cry.

And now he looks around to find his home, like Emaline, is a decayed version of its former self. A century of dust lies atop the furniture and floor.

ORVILLE (CONT'D)

No...No!

Orville makes for the front door and tries to open it, but it won't budge. Orville yanks at the handle. He pounds on the wood. He screams for help but to no avail. No one, including we the audience can hear him.

Orville moves to a window and tries to pry it open.

31A - EXT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT - 31A

Through the window, we see Orville crying for help and trying to break out as we PULL BACK, leaving him there.

32 ***OMIT-INT. ORVILLE'S HOUSE - NIGHT*** 32

33 EXT. BODIE - NIGHT 33

WIND WHISTLES over the decayed remnants of the town. We MOVE THROUGH it past the Methodist Church, the Saloon--

Out to the timeless, rugged mountains and chaparral.

34 EXT. MINE - NIGHT 34

To the mouth of a familiar mine.

We PUSH IN darkness surrounding us...

35 - INT. MINE - CONTINUOUS - 35

Pushing in deeper, into the black, down into the mine
until...GASP--a pair of EYES snap open and we--

SMASH TO BLACK.