

The Claim Jumpers

A CHRISTMAS STORY By ADDISON HOWARD GIBSON
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THE wagon was an old, ramshackle affair and creaked dismally as the shabby mules dragged it slowly along over the obscure prairie road. Their harness was a combination of ropes and well worn straps, whose hard edges had rubbed off patches of the sorrel hair from the animals' flank sides and sharp backs.

The wagon cover was soiled and patched in many places, and through its center protruded a short, rusty stovepipe, from which issued a thin volume of blue smoke which stretched out in a long wake behind, held in form by the chill December air.

Now and then flocks of brown sparrows would rise up out of the dead grass and whirl away like withered leaves about on an autumn breeze, while near the roadside saty little prairie dogs perched above their holes and chattered and barked defiance at the dilapidated vehicle as it went lumbering by.

On a board across the front part of the wagon, lines in hand, sat a girl apparently not more than nineteen years old, though she was in reality twenty-one. A mass of dark gold curls peeped from under the hood that covered her shapely head, her eyes were bright hazel, and the breath of chill wind that crept up under the canvas gave a vivid color to her pretty cheeks.

"Faith, how much farther is it to Uncle Ethan's?" anxiously inquired a youth of ten who occupied a low bench that stood in the center of the wagon bed.

"A long way yet, dear, I am afraid," replied the girl. "More than a hundred miles, I should say."

"Then we can't have no Trismus," plaintively sighed a curly haired mite scarcely more than five years old, who lay half buried in the folds of a huge buffalo robe.

"I'm afraid our Christmas will be rather dreary, Bessie," responded Faith, a momentary shadow crossing her fair face, "but let us be thankful we have such a nice shelter from the cold."

She added quickly, casting her eyes about the interior of the canvas covered wagon, then out across the dreary stretch of houseless prairie upon which a few scattering flakes of snow were beginning to fall.

At the rear end of the wagon was a pile of bedclothes, while in a clear place near the middle stood a small heating stove, in which a cheerful wood fire was burning. On the ridgepole at the top of the bows hung several cooking utensils, and under the front seat was a good sized provision box, containing part of a sack of flour, some sides of bacon, tea, sugar and a few other necessary articles of food.

A little less than a year prior to the present time Faith Haskins' father had died, leaving her alone on a bleak Nebraska claim and with her little brother and sister, Clint and Bessie, to care for. Their mother had been taken from them only eight months before her husband. The condition was a serious one, as they were left very

poor, and there seemed nothing in the future sufficiently hopeful to mitigate their grief. Faith, however, true to her name, did not despair, but went bravely to work to support herself and the children. During the summer, with Clint's help, she cultivated a small patch of ground, and the winter previous had earned a small sum by teaching a short term of school. Realizing that it would be almost impossible for them to continue this mode of life for any length of time, she had written to her mother's brother, Ethan Bartley, who lived on a ranch in southwestern Kansas, and he had advised her to sell their small property and come with Clint and Bessie and make their home with him.

Very gladly had Faith accepted the offer, but, finding it impossible to consent to her few effects into cash, she left the place in charge of a renter and not having money for railroad fare, decided to make the journey by wagon. There were a score of young claim holders who would have been very well pleased to retain the girl as a housekeeper for themselves, but she cared for none of them and would not marry simply for a home.

It was a great undertaking this journey of theirs and at this season of the year, but it seemed preferable to that cruel winter on the claim, and they set out in apparently good spirits. The younger ones were indeed happy, as all children are at the prospect of a change. They had been traveling for about two weeks and had reached a point near the center of western Kansas and were pressing on toward "Uncle Ethan's ranch" as fast as the now jaded mules could take them.

It was a lonely and desolate sight that met Faith's eyes as they wandered wearily over the brown, cheerless plain. For miles and miles around no sign of a human habitation broke the monotonous wildness of the scenery save at rare intervals when some abandoned sod shanty or dugout could be dimly seen, scarcely distinguishable from the brown grass which surrounded it.

"There ought to be a settlement somewhere near here," remarked the girl driver as a blue line of scrubby trees loomed up in the distance through the falling snow. "I hope we'll reach the timber before nightfall," she went on, casting a troubled glance at the threatening sky.

"Yes, sir," returned the young lady, turning the mule she was holding so that she could face the men. "Is there any place near where I can get the wheel mended?"

"Waal, that's ole Berger's blacksmith shop, over at Miley's store, but it's nigh three miles from hyer. What's yer men folks?" he inquired, glancing around.

"We have no men folks with us," replied Faith. "Yer don't mean ter say yer travellin' alone with only them two kids?" broke in Jim Hancock.

"Yes," responded she simply. "We have come from Nebraska and are on the way to our uncle's, whose home is in the southwestern part of this state."

"Waal, I'll be!" But the speaker suddenly grew red in the face and did

not proceed to tell what he would "be."

"Yer see," he began, "it seems plumb cur-us-like ter see a woman travellin' alone sich weather." Then after an almost imperceptible pause, as though for explanation, he continued: "But it's lucky we fellows happened along; it is, by ginge! Now, miss, if you're willin' ter trust Jim hyer an' me, we'll take that wheel over ter ole Berger's an' git him ter mend it up fer yer."

"If you'd only be so kind," returned Faith hastily, for, notwithstanding the relief she experienced, the situation was not free from embarrassment. "I'd be very much obliged."

"Not er tall," replied Ike, with an attempt at polite speech. The combined strength of the two served to get the wagon propped up in a short time and the offending member removed.

"I reckon we can carry it betwixt us," said Jim. "But, gee whiz, ain't this wind cuttin'!"

"Reg'lar ole nor'wester," rejoined his companion. "A bad night fer them kids an' the woman ter be out, an' Christmas eve, at that! It's sufferin' wicked—'tis, fer surs!"

"Why, blame us, wot we chawin' erbout! Ther's Rob's cabin over thar a few steps, back o' them persimmons." Then, turning to Faith: "Miss, it's goin' ter be perty rough weather ternaigh, an' I reckon er cabin would be right smart comfer'abler than campin' out in er wagon. Ther's a shanty over beyond that patch o' timber—belongs ter a friend o' ours, a chap on a visit ter his ole hosses in Indianny. Ter welcome ter 'hide thar—you an' them kids—'if yer care ter."

"I'd be only too glad of shelter from this storm," said Faith—"that is, if you are sure the real owner wouldn't care."

"He's not one o' them kind—this friend o' ourn ain't. He's open hearted as th' day an' ther bees' settler in these yer parts."

Her anxiety on this score being removed, she allowed Ike to lead the way to the cabin, which was only a short distance, but invisible from where the accident occurred on account of the trees. It was a new log structure, tightly daubed with lime and sand. There were a snug fireplace and good though scanty homemade furniture.

Faith was overjoyed at the prospect of a comfortable lodging so strangely provided and cast a quick and curious glance about the place. The deer hide thrown across the anthers above the fireplace and a man's old straw hat coat and blue jeans hung on pegs at the head of a rude couch gave satisfactory evidence that the owner was a bachelor, but he was away, and the fact gave her no uneasiness.

The built a roaring fire on the open hearth, while Jim brought from the wagon such articles as would be needed during their stay. This done, the two men mounted and rode away, carrying the crippled wheel between them, but with a promise that it should be back "fore mornin'."

"Facie," said Bessie, clinging to her sister's skirts as she made preparations for the evening meal, "this is mo' as good as Trismus, ain't it?"

"Yes, dear, and I'll try to make it up to be just as good as Christmas by an extra fine supper," said the older one, stooping to kiss the happy face.

"Ah, Faith," spoke up Clint as he stirred the fire into a brighter blaze, "make dapjacks an' 'oddes of 'em, an' say, let's have brown sugar strup!"

When Barclay and Hancock reached the blacksmith shop they tumbled their burden to the ground with "Shed'd never 'ave got it here, never!" Berger, large

and stout begrimed, was just closing up for the night.

"Hol' on hyer, ole thinker!" greeted Jim, springing from his horse and pushing the wheel before him into the shop. "We want this 'ere wheel mended up right 'way."

"That's right," put in Ike. "An' let's see yer git an' or'ental hump on yer self. We want to carry it back where it cum from 'fore this snow gits enny wuss."

Berger mumbled something about being tired and hungry, but nevertheless set to work at once. Satisfied that it would be repaired as expeditiously as possible by hitching their ponies out of the wind and started for Miley's store. They paused a minute before one of the windows and looked in. The proprietor was tying up a package for a little man with a red scarf around his neck, while a solitary individual stood warming himself by the fire in the back part of the store. Suddenly an exclamation burst from Jim, and, grabbing his companion by the shoulder, he pointed excitedly to the figure at the stove.

"Look, Ike; thar's Rob Desmond got back, sure as shootin'!"

"Yer right, by ginge!" ejaculated Ike as he peered in above the rim of frost on the pane at a handsome, well built young fellow of about twenty-five who had taken off his hat and coat and seemed to be making himself thoroughly comfortable in front of Miley's old rust spotted heater.

"Wot'll he say?"

"'Bout his cabin?"

"Yep."

"Lightnin' an' razors!"

"Say, Ike, I've struck an idee," whispered his companion, with a half suppressed chuckle. "We can have a good one on Rob—the best thing out—a reg'lar Christmas joke!"

"Wot is it?"

Approaching his friend, Jim spoke a few words in his ear. Ike put both hands over his mouth to smother the laughter he could not quite repress.

"That'll be a rich one on Bob, all right. We'll do it! By Jimson, we will!" he exclaimed. "A feller needs a little cheer o' some kind at Christmas time." Then after a few minutes of hurried conference the two entered the store. After greeting Miley, who stood behind his counter, they hastened back to the wheel and gave the new arrival hearty welcome.

"And what's the news?" asked Desmond as he shook hands with them both.

"News?" said Jim, assuming a reflective look and pecking up his eyebrows. "Oh, nothin' much, 'cept the ole Biler's sold out an' left. An' lemme see—yes, thar's Super, he got thrown an' broke his collar bone, an' us gals has been doin' wot we could ter patch 'im up. Waal, an' then, 'ther's a wairoo look, 'thar's some new settlers comin' in lately—wantin' timber claims an' jumpin' 'em, too, when they git a chance. But how'd yer leave the ole folks back in Indianny?"

"All well, and could hardly tear myself away from them."

"I reckon hearin' 'bout yer claim has kinder hiked yer back," remarked Ike, regarding him out of the corner of his eye.

"My claim! What do you mean?"

And Desmond's blue eyes dilated widely and grew almost black.

"I s'posed yer heered all about it 'fore this," said Jim. "Why, yer see, yer claim has been kinder took. A family moved later yer shanty. Yes, they have, by ginge!" he added as a wave of incredulity stole over his listener's features.

"Do you mean to tell me that some low down sneak has dared to jump my claim while I've been back visitin' my father and mother?" cried Desmond, the flush of doubt changing to one of resentment.

"Looks poverfully that way," admitted his tormentor. "Seed a kivered wagon thar an' smoke pourin' out o' yer chimney."

"Who is the sneaking cur?" demanded the now thoroughly aroused man.

"I dunno."

"Well, it won't take me long to find out," retorted Rob, drawing on his heavy buffalo overcoat with an angry jerk.

"Wot! Yer ain't goin' ter go ter yer claim right now?"

"Yes, and I'll see that that sneak thief gets out of my shack in a hurry. I've got perty well warmed up," with a grim smile, "and don't need Miley's fire any longer."

"I wouldn't go if I was you," said Ike.

"You wouldn't?" eying him with contemptuous astonishment.

"No."

"You must be a fool if you think I'm going to give up my land, after all I've done on it, without so much as a 'by your leave!'"

"But yer might get inter trouble."

"Might I?" cried Desmond, with a gesture of disgust, holding up a pair of heavy pistols and then thrusting them into his belt. "We'll see about that! If the cuss isn't off my premises inside an hour I'll give him 'trouble' and lots of it!"

"I don't think you'll run that settler out," said Jim coolly.

"You don't!"

"What's the reason?"

"Thar's sev'ral reasons, an' as fer me, I wouldn't want ter tackle the job."

"You wouldn't? Well, don't worry. I'll not call on you for assistance. I'll go and, with a quick stride, Rob Desmond walked out of the store, got his horse from the stable where it had been kept during his absence, mounted and was soon galloping away through the suowy dusk of the late afternoon.

When he was well beyond earshot the two conspirators went off into roars of laughter. Then they had to acquaint Miley with the occasion of their mirth, for he enjoyed a joke as well as the next man.

"It's a good one on Rob, by gum!" cried the storekeeper, joining heartily in the laughter.

"Which calls for a box o' cigars an' two bottles o' Miley's temperance phosphate, don't it, Ike?" demanded Jim.

"That's wot'er!" affirmed Ike. "An' the same to be charged ter Rob Desmond's account?"

"Good enough," said Miley. "Five dollars is cheap plenty fer 'im to get off with. I imagine I kin see 'im a-gittin' madder 'n ever an' ridin' like all perseeded through the snowstorm down ter his claim." chuckled the old man

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coming in. After they had partially recovered from their embarrassment—and the genial atmosphere did much toward restoring them to their natural selves—they distributed their gifts and received the young lady's blushing thanks for all their kindness to her.

Desmond said: "Pretty good joke you tried to play on me tonight, boys," with a slap on their shoulders, at the same time laughing heartily. "But you see how it has turned out. Only I'll have to explain. This little woman, Faith Haskins, and I used to go to school together away back near the old Tippecanoe in Indiana.

"We grew up as lovers, but her father thought I wasn't of much account except to pick an old guitar or play the fiddle, so when he had taken his family off to Nebraska he wouldn't allow Faith to write to me, and of course I lost track of her. But I loved her just the same, and that I might become more worthy, gave up my idle habits, taught school for a few terms

and earned the money to give me a start here in Kansas on this timber claim and am in a pretty fair way to make my living, as you know. I find my little school friend has not forgotten me, and since she had the audacity to 'jump my claim' in my absence I think I may as well keep her here. Now, as you fellows have already had a 'finger in the pie,' I want you to go with us tomorrow to visit the judge over at the courthouse. Something's going to take place there that will celebrate Christmas in proper style. It was kind of you to see to repairing the wagon, but there won't be any use for it going to Uncle Ethan's ranch, for Clint and Bessie will have to stand and help us be happy. You'll go, won't you, boys?"

"Go? In course we will! We'll slip you and her through, if the earth splits a cog. We will, you bet! By ginge, but you're a lucky galoot! I wish ole Christmas 'd drop a jewel like that inter my stockin'."

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