The Claim Jumpers

A CHRISTMAS STORY

By.... ADDISON HOWARD GIBSON

Copyright, 1905, by Addison Howard Gibson

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' lank 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 borne aloft on an autumn breeze, while near the roadside saucy 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 tan'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, Clinton 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 convert their 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 another 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 a 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.

It was about 4 in the afternoon when she drove the tired team down a little slope which led into a low, winding valley. A scant growth of scraggy elms and ghostly sycamores skirted the small, crooked stream, while dense thickets of plum and persimmon were scattered here and there. The latter just now were prodigal in their production of bunches of golden purple fruit. A quick glance about decided Faith to camp here for the night. She was just reining the team from the rutty road into a sheltered glade when there was a sharp jolt, accompanied by a sound of breaking wood, as one of the wheels suddenly dropped into a deep, rain washed gully.

An involuntary cry of dismay escaped her when she leaned out and discovered that the wheel was broken.

"Oh, Faith, what ever will we do now?" cried Clint as he saw what had happened. And Bessie, thoroughly frightened, began crying bitterly.

"Never mind, little one; it'll be all right," said Faith encouragingly. "We can get the wheel mended somewhere." But despite her cheerful words she realized that it might require many miles of weary travel to have the damage to the wagon repaired. Even if there should be a shop within two or three miles, which was not at all likely in such an isolated spot, how was she to transport the heavy broken wheel even a single mile? Although she could see no way as yet to overcome the difficulty, she was determined not to give up. There was always some way out of every dilemma, and her ever hopeful heart told her she would surely find one in this instance.

She climbed out of the wagon and, assisted by Clint, began to unhitch the team, while Bessie, dragging the buffalo robe after her, stood under a persimmon tree gazing at the cause of their present trouble with tear wet eyes. The storm was increasing rapidly, and the icy wind blew the flakes through the long, dead grass with a sharp, hissing sound.

As Faith, shivering with cold and apprehension, led the animals away from the wagon the sound of approaching hoofs came through the snow laden air, and the next instant two men mounted on sturdy ponies reined in near the wrecked vehicle. They looked to be about thirty, were full bearded and clad in the rough garb usually worn by plainsmen of the west. Broad brimmed hats covered their heads, and each had a brace of heavy revolvers stuck in his wide leather belt. In one unaccustomed to this style of dress the appearance of these armed men might have induced a feeling of terror, but it was not so with Faith. Such types of western life were familiar to her, she having spent the past four years on the borders of Nebraska.

"Good evenin', miss," said Ike Barclay, dismounting from his pony. "Had a breakdown, I see. Bad job!" he continued after examining the wagon critically.

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

"We have no men folks with us," replied Faith.

"Wot! Yer don't mean ter say yer travelin' 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," Ike began, "it seems plumb cur'us-like — see a woman travelin' alone sich weather." Then after an almost imperceptible pause, as though for explanation, he continued: "But it's lucky we fellers happened along; it is, by ginger! 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 sure!"

"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 ternight, 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' ourn, a chap on a visit ter his ole home in Indianny. Yer welcome ter 'bide 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 bes' settler in these yere 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 rifle thrown across the antlers 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.

Ike 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 mos' 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 flapjacks an' 'oodles of 'em, an', say, let's have brown sugar sirup!"

When Barclay and Hancock reached the blacksmith shop they tumbled their burden to the ground with "She'd never 'ave got it here, never!" Berger, large and dust begrimed, was just closing up for the night.

"Hol' on hyer, ole tinker!" 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' he's see yer git an or'ental bump 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, they hitched 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 ginger!" 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 check the laughter he could not quite repress.

"That'll be a rich one on Rob, all right. We'll do it! By jimson, we will!" he exclaimed. "A feller needs a leetle cheer of 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 stove and gave the new arrival a hearty welcome.

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

"News?" said Jim, assuming a reflective look and puckering up his eyes

Continued on page 8

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

In Our Remodeled Store,

Surrounded by Christmas Suggestions you will find it easy to pick an

APPROPRIATE CHRISTMAS GIFT.

The Goods are all in now and the display has invariably been called "Simply Elegant!" Distance doesn't lend enchantment here, either; you must come into the store to realize the full beauty of the display. There is a lot embraced in the word TOILET ARTICLES. With us it means a marvelous assortment of Perfumes, Fancy Soaps, Brushes of all kinds--many things for both men and women.

Beautiful CUT GLASS Display.

This is a new line with us, but it's a fine one. There are many individual pieces as well as sets. They are all of the finest cut.

Then we are showing a specially fine line of Hand Mirrors and Mirrors for the dresser in Ebony frames. Everything is rich, and considering the quality--Cheap.

Ladies can secure a box of Fine Cigars for their Gentlemen friends with our guarantee that they will be appreciated.

Don't fail to look through our store when doing your Christmas shopping.

THE ACKERMAN-STEWART DRUG CO.