

The Claim Jumpers

A CHRISTMAS STORY

By ADDISON HOWARD GIBSON

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THE wagon was an old, ramshackle affair and creaked dully as the shabby mules dragged it slowly along over the obscure prairie road. Its 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 borne aloft on an autumn breeze, while near the roadside noisy little prairie dogs peered 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, lined in hand, sat a girl apparently not more than nineteen years old, though she was in reality twenty-one. A mass of dark curls cascaded from under the hood that covered her simply 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 slices 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 hard 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 wilderness of the scenery save that rare intervals where some abandoned old 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 entry 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't 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 over 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 gnawing at the cause of their present trouble with tearful 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 plainmen 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 frontier of Nebraska.

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

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' th' best settler in these yere parts."

Her anxiety on this score being removed, she allowed like 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 damped with lime and sand. There were a snug fireplace and good though scanty homelike 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 ribs 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.

He 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'."

"Facts," 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 ye 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' 'osties of 'em, an' say, let's have brown sugar strap!"

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' 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 gets anny 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 Milley's store. They paused a minute before one of the windows and looked in. The proprietor was trying up a package for a little man with a red scarf around his neck, while a solitary individual stood watching 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, there's Rob Desmond got back, sure as thoutin'!" "Yeer right, by giner!" 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 Milley's old rust spotted heater.

"What he say?" "Hout his cabin?" "Yeep." "Lightnin' an' razors!"

Torture of a Preacher. Of the torture of Rev. O. D. Moore, pastor of the Baptist church, of Harpersville, N. Y., I suffered intensely because of a persistent cough, resulting from the grip. I had to sleep sitting up in bed. I tried many remedies without relief, until I took Dr. King's New Discovery for Consumption, Coughs and Colds, which entirely cured my cough and saved me from consumption. A grand cure for diseased conditions of Throat and Lungs. At Chas. Strang, Druggist, price 50c and \$1.00, guaranteed. Trial bottle free.

A Common Misapprehension. One of the commonest of misapprehensions is, "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." The words "form of" are interpolated in the original, which was contributed to literature by C. C. Colton, author of "The Lagoon."

He Surrendered. She—if you could have one wish, what would it be? He—it would be that—that—oh, if I only dared to tell you what it would be! She—Well, go on. Why do you suppose I brought up the wishing subject?

from the stable where it had been kept during his absence, mounted and was soon galloping away through the snowy 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 Milley with the occasion of their mirth, for he enjoyed a joke as well as the next one.

"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' Milley's temperance phosphate, don't it, Ike?" demanded Jim. "That's wotever!" affirmed Ike. "An' the same to be charged ter Rob Desmond's account!"

"Exactly." "Good enough," said Milley. "Five dollars is cheap a plenty for him to get off with. I imagine I kin see him a-gittin' madder 'n ever an' ridin' like all possessed through the snowstorm down ter his claim," chuckled the old man as he reached for a box of cigars on the shelf.

"Hol on a minute, Milley," said Jim. "Wot yer say, Ike, ter dispensin' with them cigars an' phosphatizin' this time an' takin' th' amount o' Rob's treat in the toys an' sich tricks for Christmas presents for them kids an' puttin' in five of our own for some-thin' next fer that little woman?"

"The very idee! By thump! I kin remember how Nooy's ark an' th' whistles an' sich do-funnies us'er stir me up when I was a kid back in Jackson county at Christmas time. Yer a plumb genus, Jim, yer a binger!"

Meantime Rob Desmond, his mind filled with righteous wrath against the unprincipled wretch who had dared "jump his claim," was gnawing his cabin in his anger and cutting words were scarcely noticed. Only one dominating desire possessed his soul—to set eyes on "that rascal of a claim jumper" and order him off his domain forthwith.

When he reached the persimmon thicket he hitched his horse and walked energetically toward his cabin. The door was partly open, held so by little Bessie, who was watching the falling snow. She was alone, the others having gone to the dugout stable to see that the mules were made comfortable for the night.

The glow from the fireplace revealed, to the owner's astonished gaze, a bright eyed little fairy with long golden hair. She was swaying back and forth humming to herself. Then she broke out earnestly: "Oh, Santy, turn right here an' make our wagon well, an', if you can spare 'em, jist drop some nice Trismus presents down."

She ceased suddenly as the form of a man loomed up before her. She had been asking for Santa Claus, and there was now no doubt in her mind but that Rob, in his big fur overcoat covered with snowflakes, was the great person for whom she had been calling.

"Where's yer pa, little girl?" asked Desmond, entering his own cabin. "He's gone," answered Bessie, looking half shyly at the visitor. "Gone? Where to?" "Gone to heaven!" said the little girl very simply.

"Humph!" muttered Rob to himself. "I didn't know claim jumpers went to heaven." "Is you Santa Claus?" asked Bessie abruptly, fixing her gaze, first on the great buffalo overcoat dotted with white, then raising her eyes wistfully to the young man's handsome face.

"No, little one, I'm not Santy," said he kindly, the hard look on his face vanishing under the magnetism of the child's presence and guileless prattle. Desmond loved children. What if some of her folks had wronged him! She was innocent and as pure as the new fallen snow. His anger having subsided, he drew from his pockets a few trinkets and a paper of pretty candies which he had bought at the store.

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"Faith! Faith Haskins!" he cried. "Is it you—and here?" "Oh, Rob, I never expected to see you again!" she sobbed, burying her face in the folds of her shawl. The sight of an old friend had thrown her off her guard and brought back to her sharply and keenly all her trouble and loneliness and made her strangely weak.

When Clint came in a few minutes later he found his sister in the arms of what appeared to him to be a big buffalo. Never having heard that buffaloes were in the habit of coming into cabins and hugging people, he approached Bessie, whose teeth had just decapitated a candy rabbit, and asked in an awed whisper: "What's got Faith? Is it hurtin' her?"

"I does not," Bessie whispered back as well as she could with her mouth full. "It's awfully nice, I does her a relation to Santa Claus. See what he did me!" holding up her presents.

Returning from the blacksmith's shop, Ike and Jim left the repaired wheel by the wagon and stole quietly up to the shack. As they passed one of the windows they looked in to see if their victim were there. With surprise they beheld him sitting by Faith's side, holding both her hands in his. The delight revealed to their astonished sight the two happy faces, while two equally happy children were sitting on the floor at their feet.

The fellows, realizing that their joke had "missed fire," started to walk away, but Rob, catching sight of them, went to the door and insisted on their 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:

"Trotty 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 Tippencano 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 give up my idle habits, taught school for a few terms and earned the money to drive 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 stay and help us be happy. You'll go, won't you, boys?"

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

It goes without saying that his majesty the turkey will grace the Christmas dinner table, but for variety and to give a new note to this feast it is an excellent idea to follow the southern fashion of introducing ham to share honors with the reigning fowl.

The ham may be either hot or cold and should be baked to a crisp brown. Few there are who understand the art of preparing ham in this way. First it should be partly baked with the thick outside skin left on, and then this should be removed and the fat stuck roll of cloves and left to brown in a slow oven. The spice imparts a deliciously delicate flavor and should not be taken out, but left in the ham just as it comes from the oven. No sauce is needed with ham cooked after this rule.—New York Herald.

Christmas a Lucky Birthday. There is an old superstition that to be born on Christmas day is to be lucky all one's life, and in Silesia there is a belief that a boy born on Christmas day must be brought up a lawyer or he will become a thief.

The Origin of Christmas Greens. At the Saturnalia, the heathen prototype of Christmas, it was the Roman custom to decorate the house with evergreens. This was done to give the woodland spirits a refuge from the cold.

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Societies of Medford. I. O. O. F.—Lodge No. 81, meets in I. O. O. F. hall every Saturday at 7 p. m. Visiting brothers always welcome. MARK BAKER, N. G. J. L. DEMMER, Rec. Sec.

I. O. O. F.—Boque River Encampment, No. 10, meets in I. O. O. F. hall first and third Thursdays of each month at 7 p. m. J. L. DEMMER, C. P. H. H. HARVEY, Sec. Redmen—Medford, Wagonka No. 30, meets every Thursday in I. O. O. F. hall, Angle like, C. C. BARRETT, Sec. Modern Woodmen—Meets first and third Fridays of each month, Garnett Committee, Duncan Secretary. Meets in Redmen's hall.

Olive Branch Lodge No. 25, meets in I. O. O. F. hall first and third Tuesdays of each month. Visiting sisters invited to attend. BIDDIE HALL, Rec. Sec. B. B. HASKINS, N. G.

F. A. M.—Mets first Friday of each month at 8 p. m. in Masonic hall. J. W. LAWTON, Rec. Sec. K. of J.—Tallman Lodge No. 31, meets Monday evening at 8 p. m. Visiting brothers always welcome. M. PURDIE, N. G. M. HILLIEN, C. P. M. HILLIEN, Sec.

Knights of the Macabees—Triumphanti No. 14, meets in regular review on the 1st and 3rd Fridays of each month in A. O. U. W. Hall at 7 p. m. J. L. DEMMER, C. P. J. L. DEMMER, Sec. Knights of the Ku Klux Klan—Meets first and third Fridays of each month at 7 p. m. in I. O. O. F. hall. Visiting sisters invited to attend. MRS. ADA MILLIS, G. N. PRICE ANGLE, Clerk.

W. R. C.—Chester A. Arthur corps No. 34, meets first and third Wednesdays of each month in I. O. O. F. hall in Woodman's hall. Visiting sisters invited to attend. MRS. IVAN HANSON, Pres. MRS. HESTER HARTZELL, Sec.

G. A. R.—Chester A. Arthur Post No. 47, meets first and third Wednesdays of each month in I. O. O. F. hall in Woodman's hall. Visiting comrades cordially invited to attend. MRS. IVAN HANSON, Pres. F. M. STEWART, Ad. Supt.

W. G. T. U.—Meets every other Thursday at the Presbyterian church. Mrs. BUCK, President. Mrs. J. MORGAN, Secretary. Fraternal Brotherhood—Meets first and third Friday evenings at 7:30 p. m. in I. O. O. F. hall. Visiting brothers cordially invited to attend. O. W. MURPHY, Pres. W. J. HOCKEY, Sec.

W. S.—Rebecca Chapter, No. 66, meets second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at Masonic hall. Visiting sisters invited to attend and Brothers always welcome. MRS. I. H. HITCHCOCK, W. M. MATTIE WHITE, Secretary.

Uniform Rank, K. of P.—Meet at the call of the captain in I. O. O. F. hall. Captain, E. L. HANCOCK, Recorder. A. O. U. W.—Court Medford, No. 850, meets every Monday night at 7:30 p. m. in I. O. O. F. hall. Arthur H. Johnston, Sec. Visiting Foresters cordially welcome. L. E. HOOVER, C. R. FRANK H. HULL, Rec. Sec.

CHURCHES OF MEDFORD. Methodist Episcopal Church—Chas. T. Meeker, pastor. Preaching every Sabbath at 10 a. m. and 7:30 p. m. Sunday school at 10 a. m. M. S. Martin, Supt. Christian Endeavor, 6:30 p. m. M. S. Martin, Christian Endeavor. B. M. E. Church—Sunday morning, Julius Meeker, leader. Epworth League at 6:30 p. m. May Phillips, president. Regular prayer meetings every Thursday evening at 7:30 p. m. Ladies Aid Society every Tuesday afternoon at 2:30 p. m. D. T. Larson, president. W. F. M. S. meets at 7:30 p. m. each month. Mrs. J. M. Cox, Pres. Mission Society.

Christian church—Corner of Sixth and I streets. Services on the first and third Sundays of each month. Sunday school and Christian Endeavor every Sunday morning. Prayer meeting every Thursday evening. The people welcome. Rev. J. H. FOSTER.

Methodist Episcopal Church South—H. B. Yonck, pastor. Preaching every Sunday at 11 a. m. and 7:30 p. m. Sunday school at 10 a. m. Prayer meeting Tuesday evening at 7:30 p. m. Women's Home Mission Society meets first Wednesday of each month at 7:30 p. m. Everyone is cordially invited to all our services.

Christian Science services are held every Sunday morning at eleven o'clock at the residence of E. H. Dunham, of Talent. All are welcome.

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