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OUT ON THE DESERT



A THANKSGIVING TALE

By ADDISON HOWARD GIBSON

ARE you sure we are on the right trail, father?" asked June Haskins, peering anxiously out of the covered wagon across miles of tawny desert, relieved only by straggling clumps of dwarfed sagebrush and cactus. "The stranger we passed at the last water hole directed us this way," answered an old man as he thrust a white head and a weather beaten face forward to take a fresh survey of their surroundings. "There were so many trails there I might have made a mistake. This isn't a very well marked one, but we'd best follow it. I don't want to turn back," fretfully. "The wagon was old, and the wheels creaked dismally as the ill matched



"WE CAN TRUST IN GOD TO HELP US," SAID THE GIRL.

team, a jaded, rawboned horse and a plucky little mule, pulled it along over an almost obliterated trail. "Poor old Bob!" said the girl pityingly, looking at the horse as he panted and floundered along in the sand, trying to do his share. "I don't believe he will last to the next water hole if we are on the right trail." "He does seem nearly done for," returned her father. "The trip's been too hard for him, but I did think he'd stand it with Pecksniff to get us to the mines." A mile farther on they were obliged to stop. Old Bob had given out. June jumped from the wagon and undid the harness, leading the horse to the back of the wagon. She was just bringing him a basin of water from the meager supply in the little keg, which had been filled at the last watering place, when, with a groan, old Bob sank to the ground. In a few moments he was dead. The girl could not keep back the tears as she gazed upon the stiffened limbs of Old Bob. "Well, well!" exclaimed her father, a quaver in his voice. "Old Bob's a goner." Then he turned away, rubbing his hardened hands in nervous bewilderment. "This is a cheerful situation for us, June, and Thanksgiving day at that! Here we are with only Pecksniff left alone out here in the desert forty miles from nowhere and scarcely enough food in the wagon to feed a jack rabbit. I've brought you to this I've always been a crazy old fool." "No, no, father," said June, recovering herself to cheer the disheartened old man. "We both thought it was best to go to the mines, where you are sure to get work. Never mind. We'll rest an hour or two; then we'll take Pecksniff and go on to the mines on foot. You can ride and I'll walk." "We can't ride Pecksniff," returned the old man as the girl led him back to the wagon. "He bucks like the dickens. No, June." In a despairing tone: "we never can reach the mines without help. I tell you we are in a worse fix than you think." "We can trust in God to help us," said the girl as she assisted her father back into the wagon. Although late in November, the sun in the cloudless sky shone down upon the arid sand of the desert with great force. Blue Hills off to the south loomed vaguely in the hazy distance, and a broad mirage bordered the horizon. Presently out of the quivering heat waves a horseman rode toward the stranded wagon. "Hello!" he called, reining in his

horse a few feet in front of the wagon. "You've met with bad luck, I see," scanning the carcass of old Bob. At the sound of the horseman's voice June Haskins' face went white, then red, by turns. Her heart began such a wild beating she could scarcely keep from crying out. In spite of the six years since she had last seen Kenneth Dolland, in spite of the beard and the costume which had changed his appearance so vastly, she recognized the man at once. She quickly drew back within the shadow of the wagon cover to escape his recognition. "Yes, bad luck," Haskins replied in a hopeless tone. As he spoke June glanced quickly at her father's face. Would he recognize the horseman? She was in a nervous dread lest he should. Their situation was deplorable enough without having to undergo the renewal of the old family quarrel out there on the desert. But as her father gave no sign that he remembered the man she sank back in the seat relieved. "Where are you bound?" asked Kenneth Dolland. "To Crawley's mines," answered Haskins. "Crawley's mines?" with surprise "You're thirty miles out of your way." "As bad as that?" said the old man, sighing despondently. "You were right, June. We're on the wrong trail." As Haskins turned to his daughter with the helplessness of old age in trouble the horseman caught a full view of the girl's face. Their eyes met. With a quick start he cried: "You here?" Instantly June's eyes enfolded him to silence. With an effort Kenneth Dolland controlled his desire to speak to the woman he loved, the one that he had wandered hundreds of miles from the old home to forget. "What did you say?" inquired the old man, looking curiously at the horseman. "That it's fortunate I found you," returned Dolland, shooting an under standing look from his eyes straight at the girl. "Yes," agreed Haskins, "we'd be mighty grateful for some help just now. You see," he went on, waxing confidential under the stranger's evident sympathetic interest, "when I came west from Missouri I got a little orchard in the hills near the Sierra Madre mountains. Everything was promising, fruit fine, but the mountain fires swept down on us, burning us out of house and home. I know Crawley, and if I can reach his mines he'll give me work." "Maybe you wouldn't object to helping me," said the young man. "I have a good little mine in Blue Hills, about five miles from here. I am at present alone except my cook, Ching Lee. I have tents and plenty of food and water. If you're willing I'll hitch my horse alongside that pugnacious fellow," indicating Pecksniff, who was showing some hostile demonstrations toward the strange horse, "and drive you over there. You will be my Thanksgiving guests," he added, with a smile, "and if you don't like Blue suffering if you will go yourself!" Dolland said in firm tones. "Listen here! I have a good claim, and I can take good care of you and June. Where's the sense of nursing that old fend? I never harmed you, and I'll be a son to you if you'll let me. I've found June after you've kept her hidden from me all these years, and I intend to keep her now, with or without you, just as you choose." June was clinging to her father, sobbing. Haskins gave a long look across the desert; then his eyes rested tenderly upon the girl's bowed head. After a pause he looked back at the stalwart young man determinedly following them. Suddenly the anger left his face, and he moved toward Kenneth. "I've been an old fool, Ken," he said, "but I won't stand between you and June any longer. It isn't any use to fight love and Providence." Gifts after you've rested a day or two we'll see about your getting over to the Crawley mines." Years ago the Haskinses and the Dollands had lived on adjoining farms in Missouri. In spite of a bitter quarrel that existed between the heads of the family, Kenneth and June loved each other. When Haskins had discovered the attachment he had angrily dismissed the young man, sold out and left the country. Unable to trace the movements of Haskins and finally despairing of ever finding June, Kenneth had buried himself in prospecting for gold in the far west. After weary days of wandering over dusty, half obliterated trails, where the bleached skeletons of ill fated animals hinted many a terrible tale of suffering, the tired old man and his faithful daughter found Blue Hills an ideal retreat. Obeying the directions of his em-

ployer, Ching Lee was soon busy in the shed kitchen preparing dinner for the guests. "We'll eat our Thanksgiving meal together under the trees," announced Kenneth, his eyes flashing with joy as he watched June's deft fingers arranging a tablecloth of paper napkins. Certain details of the feast the girl had insisted on taking out of Ching Lee's hands. Looking up from her self appointed task, June encountered Kenneth's gaze--yearning, appealing. They were alone, sheltered by the tree. Her father was behind the big tent inspecting an ore dump. Ching Lee saw only his appetizing roast, which he was basting. As Kenneth opened his arms she did not resist him. "My June! At last I find you!" was the cry of the man's pent up heart. Just as their lips met the old man's voice demanded harshly: "What does this mean?" He stood before the trapped lovers, his face full of anger. Kenneth had removed his hat, and as he faced Haskins the latter went on: "So you are Ken Dolland, eh? I know you now. You deceived me here just to get June in your power again. But I defy you. Come June!" And, jerking her rudely from Kenneth's side, he drew her toward the trail. "Where are you going?" asked Dolland. "Back on the desert," retorted Haskins. "We'll starve out there before I'll accept favors from you." The old man was shaking with mingled fatigue and anger, but slowly dragging June, white and speechless, toward the desert. Kenneth followed them. "You have no right to drag June into Improving Famous Road. For two years parts of the old National road, the natural thoroughfare from Washington and Baltimore to Wheeling and the west, have been in such bad condition through western Maryland that its usefulness as a through automobile route has been greatly impaired. The originally good surface has been worn off for miles, exposing large stones, of which its foundation was principally made. In some cases bowlders were washed down by the mountain streams, and several stretches were injured by the hauling of pine timber from the district north of Hancock and Flintstone. As a result a great deal of the through travel east and west has been going by Bedford, Ligonier, Greensburg and Pittsburgh, a longer and more hilly route than that over the National road direct to Wheeling and beyond. Lately, however, the state highway commission, encouraged and aided by the Automobile Club of Maryland, has taken an active interest in restoring the road to its old time importance.

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