

Dalosa Bonbright's Christmas Gift

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the package. Dally's fingers trifled with the string. Bonbright glanced at her father to see if she would be allowed to open it before them all.

"Christmas gif's is fer Christmas Day," suggested Rench, with a meaning look.

Dally lifted the bundle in fingers that shook—it had lain up to this time in her lap, where her father tossed it—and suddenly dropped it again. She got to her feet and went uncertainly toward the ladder-like stair which led to the loft where she slept.

"I'll put hit away," she quavered.

There was a swift flicker in the eyes of the intruder; and the Bonbrights knew as though he had told them so that Rench misdoubted there were reserves in the attic, or elsewhere out of sight, and that he now looked to what action his daughter might take to resolve that uncertainty. The back of Homer Bonbright's head felt chilly as Dally passed behind him, that bundle in her hand. In spite of his iron nerves, he stirred, turned, and half rose.

"I thort I heard ol' Bell give tongue," he said apologetically.

As if in answer to his words, the hound raised that long, clear note which had named him. "Hello!" cried a voice from the front.

Bonbright sprang to open, never doubting that it was to his own kin and helpers. The wide-flung door showed, in the square of darkness, two dripping Rences, with their first cousin, Sardis Culp, standing behind their shoulders.

"We's comin' over from Sard's house, an' the rain ketched us," began Pink Rench, who seemed to be spokesman.

"Come in. Come in, gentlemen. Yo' air sho'ly welcome," said the master of the house evenly, backing from the door. "Dally, kin ye find a cheer fer yer folks when they come a-visitin' ye?"

"This hyer'll do me," said Pink Rench, shoving the wool into a heap and casting himself down upon it. "Hope I don't interfere with yo' work none," as the old woman rose and struck her cards together, preparatory to hanging them up.

"We-all don't act the hog about water every time," suggested one of the Rench boys who had not yet spoken, as he stood upon the hearthstone and shook his wet garments. "Good fire ye got hyer—must 'a' been lookin' fer us."

With the advent of the younger men even Floyd Bonbright—trustful, slow to anger, careless, over-secure in his perfect courage—began to look about him for possible defense. This contingent, while seemingly unarmed, like old man Rench, had evidently been drinking, and they did not keep to the proprieties of the feud, as he had done. His behavior, while curious, had not been markedly offensive; but plainly their idea was a swift quarrel and a short reckoning.

Father and son observed regretfully and almost at the same instant, that old man Rench was between them and the squirrel guns on the rack over the door. The ears of both were strained for sound of the expected reinforcements. Could they keep a bold front and hold out, even if help were on the way?

"I reckon hit's 'bout done rainin'," drawled Gaffin finally. "An' I p'intedly believe Brother Bonbright'll be glad to git shet of us. Did you-all boys come afoot? Reckon I better call my nag;" and he moved toward the door.

Through all this Dalosa had hung at the ladder's foot, clutching her Christmas gift, staring with strange eyes at her invading kin. Now Bonbright, glancing swiftly about to seek the genesis of Gaffin's singular retreat, saw the girl's skirts vanishing into the attic. He took it that this announced to the enemy their defenselessness; but the odds were still only two to one, and the Bonbrights would be fighting on their own ground.

Above-stairs, Dally struck a match. The trivial sound roared along Homer Bonbright's nerves like a cannon.

III

Old Rench opened the front door, stepped outside, and whistled three times. As though in answer to his signal, several men rode up to the fence, long rifle-barrels over their shoulders gleaming wet in the light from the cabin.

"That you, Pap Rench?" called a reckless young voice. "We's out after—after coon—say, was it coon we's after, Buck?"

"Uh-huh; coon," from another mounted figure.

"An' the weather got too much for us," concluded the facetious one.

Disguise was all but dropped now, for the intermittent illumination from the open door showed that each newcomer carried two rifles. Suddenly Floyd Bonbright's tall form shouldered through the press of Rences in the doorway. He strode out among the armed and mounted men, his yellow head marking him to the terrified eyes of father and mother.

"Light an' come in, boys!" he cried, slapping a familiar hand upon the leader's horse.

Fearn Rench jerked the bridle-rein, as though he dreaded treachery. Floyd laughed out debonairly, with a sudden flashing of white teeth. "My nag shies ef' you put your hand 'bout his head like that," growled the rider half sheepishly. "Whar's Dally?"

Perhaps this inquiry may have conveyed to old Gaffin Rench that his part in the raid had been to drive the Bonbrights forth to the guns of their enemies. If this were so, he had been out-faced and unable to accomplish it.

"Ye better 'light an' come in, like Floyd says," he advised. "Ain't no use playin' you're Ham, Sham, an' Japhet in the Deluge."

They trooped across the threshold, grinning, bantering, and scuffling. The last man in shut the door and dropped the great bar across it—"to keep out the rain," he explained, with a guffaw.

Floyd Bonbright walked among them without turning his head or flinching from the close contact which their numbers now made necessary. He tossed a great armful of lightwood knots upon the fire, and the roaring flame showed the dim interior full of armed Rences, with Mother Bonbright, her husband, and Floyd crowded well to the corner farthest from the door, hemmed in by the hearth, and flanked by the ladder. Dally was nowhere to be seen.

"Find seats, gentlemen," urged Homer Bonbright's suave tones. His keen glance probed the square of darkness into which the ladder vanished. If Dally was up there opening her Christmas gift she might widow herself without waiting for her father and brothers to begin the errand upon which they had evidently come; for he indulged no doubts as to what had formed the core of that roll of calico.

Meantime, the Rences were discovering that it was not easy to murder an old man and his wife and their one unarmed defender, who looked at them point-blank with level, smiling eyes. Without first finding something to rouse the blood-thirst, it seemed impossible to begin.

In the pause, while life and death gamed silently, the rain cried down the gulch like the weeping of women and children; the wind rose and yelled above the chimney as though the spirits of air had their blood-feud, also, which must this night be settled; the cabin rocked to its rage, but the inmates noted not at all.

Gaffin turned with a muttered demand to those behind him; each man who bore two guns passed his extra weapon to his neighbor. Homer Bonbright selected the long iron poker with his eye and once more glanced backward toward the ladder.

Dally was descending. She had opened her Christmas gift. The blood-red folds were swathed about head and shoulder; they covered her right arm and hand.

"Pappy!" she cried in a shaking voice, which vainly strove to sound natural and unafraid—"pappy, I thort you'd like to see how yo' Christmas gif' sets me off!"

Old Bonbright could have throttled her. It was not for himself alone that he trembled with contained fury; here were the two beings he loved best on earth—his old, faithful wife and the lusty son of his age. Death confronted them, and this Jezebel, close on the flank, cut off the last hope. Under the folds of gay calico he divined the weapon.

Perhaps her coming had been the one thing waited for. "Th'ow up yo' hands!" shouted old Rench, dropping the rifle his son had given him till its barrel pointed at Homer Bonbright's breast.

There was no instant left for Bonbright to debate between dying then and there and letting his enemies torture h

out of existence. But Dally's arm shot suddenly forward, levelling the pistol which she had found rolled in her Christmas gift.

"Don't you shoot, Pap Rench!" she said. Steadied by the stress of action, her voice, which had trembled, rang out sharp and peremptory. "Ef you do I'll shoot you. Jeff and the others can kill me afterward—but that don't make no differ—I'll git you fust!"

A wave of relief went over Homer Bonbright's soul. They were to die—here and now—he doubted that not at all; but they were to be spared the treachery of this woman whom his son had brought home a wife.

IV

As they stood thus, the aggressors with the barred door at their back, the victims pressed to the wall on the farther side of the cabin, there burst upon the ears of all a clamor which would not be denied—a grinding, tearing, bellowing sound which seemed to be of the storm, and yet greater than the storm.

The Bonbright cabin hung against the steep side of the mountain like a swallow's nest. Between it and Bonbright's mill lay what had been the bed of Lost Creek. You could reach from the one back window, near the chimney, and touch the earth of the steep mountain-wall not more than three feet from the sill. This opening, like those in most such cabins, had been closed with a wooden shutter; but when Floyd was making things bonny for his bride he had carried up from Hepzibah and set in place a tiny four-paned sash of glass.

Dally, on the ladder, her weapon leveled unflinchingly at her father, let her glance rove an instant to this window.

"Mother!" she cried. "Come up hyer—quick!"

While the words sounded, the panes were driven in as if by bullets and pikes. A jet of roaring water leaped after the splintering glass. Lost Creek was coming down the mountain-side to find its true owners.

"The dam! The dam! Hit's busted!" yelled old Rench, letting fall his gun and whirling toward the door.

The trigger caught upon his clothing, the weapon was discharged, and a shriek of agony over by the door told that its bullet had found a mark among his own following. The water reached midleg as the old man spoke, hammering his knees with the boulders that its scour brought down.

The three Bonbrights had been hemmed into the small corner beyond the hearth, the ladder close at hand. The first inrush of water hurled past them, leaving them almost dry-shod. It was not until the tide struck against the further wall, combed up, seethed back, and rushed into the fireplace, rising as though pent in a cistern, that they were in danger.

"Come up, mammy—come up hyer!" Dally continued to cry.

Homer Bonbright seized his wife in his long arms and thrust her toward the ladder. If the door held, the house itself must go; yet such safety as there was lay in the loft.

On the hearth the fire and the intruding water had set up their primordial warfare, throwing forth an instant cloud of steam and ashes. The room was in pitchy darkness, except as some rifle was discharged when its owner stumbled or fought for footing. These flashes showed the Rences struggling in the water, while one and another of them cried out with sobs or with oaths, according to his nature.

As Homer with his wife reached the ladder he felt himself lifted by that young giant, his son, and tossed with groping hands against the rungs. Below them the fight raged; the water beat upon wall and door; the sound was of a cataract leaping through the small window, hurtling across the room, and battling for an outlet. This tide carried stones and debris; and while it was not, at the worst, over a man's head, none could keep his feet in it, nor when it had knocked him down long survive the terrible mauling which it administered. Floyd came up the ladder last, wet to the waist and fresh from a struggle in the black dark with some unidentified Rench who would not believe that safety lay in the direction of the Bonbrights, even if it was the direction which took him out of the water.

Dalosa brought a candle and matches from the bureau at her bed-head. The little wavering flame, continually blown out by the wind which this tide of death brought with it, showed them, as the

four crouched together at the ladder-way and gazed down into the raging caldron of the lower room, that the water was not above four feet on the lintel when it burst the barred door open and sprang roaring forth.

When this occurred there were four Rences able to walk, and they fled after the retreating water, leaving a brisk stream flowing from window to door, and the cabin cumbered with silent or groaning men.

These were young, unseasoned fighters; they had come out this Christmas Eve on the chance that the Bonbrights would be alone, at their mercy, and that they might feed full their spite upon the terror they could inspire. If the wild strain which slept in their blood roused and called for murder, murder it should have—but good, safe killing of those who could make no reprisals. The soaking and pounding they got, pent in a trap of their own closing, soon quenched such ardor as this. Perhaps, too, the facing of nature's elemental rage made their own puny malice seem contemptible even to themselves.

"Come back hyer, Jeff! You brother Pink—you Sardis Culp! Walk yo'selfs back into this hyer cabin and tote out them that's hurtled!" called Dally.

Mother Bonbright started down the ladder, declaring, "I'm gwine to look after them there men myse'f. The beds is all drowned, 'cep'pin' up here; but we're bound to do what we kin."

"No, we hain't," growled old Bonbright. "Nary step do ye go down there, S'lome;" and he drew her sharply back. "Most on 'em is gittin' up an'll be able to walk out on their two feet. Let 'em tote their own what cain't go."

"We don't want yo' he'p," snarled Jeff, who was tearing a shirt-sleeve in strips to bind up his father's bleeding head. "Ef this durned water"—he seemed to hold the Bonbrights responsible for the conduct of the creek—"will jest let us have enough of the road we'll go home an' stay thar'."

These men would have dragged Nature herself into their unclean quarrel, using her hand for their theft. And so they had crept up into her remote stronghold, far in the lap of the ancient mountains, where she lives alone, wrapped in solitude and cold and mist, hatching her plans, brooding upon the things that are to be.

They had sought and dugged in the earth about the great rocks that buttress the way in which Lost Creek's silver feet must run. Nature set those rocks there when time was young; yet, as is her custom, absorbed in her august affairs, she took no note of their meddling; she let them filch the stream, sent the waters down, according to her law, to turn a Rench mill, even as she had so long turned a Bonbright mill—what was it to her?

But, so it chanced, when they would have added murder to their theft, when they stood confronting their intended victims, came the hour for her reckoning, when she would wipe out the insults which had been offered her. In the night and the storm she came down the mountain-side, on viewless feet, lightnings playing about her hair, the winds flying before her, Lost Creek in her hand; and, again by her law, she rolled it and hurled it through the window upon them, with most of the rocks which had made its bed.

The wrecks of her vengeance, a groaning cavalcade, had already started down the mountain beside a stream, which flowed in the centre of the trail. Tomorrow the Bonbrights might sue for her favor by restoring her boundaries and once more filling pond and race. But now Lost Creek held the road, and whoso would descend Little Turkey Track that Christmas Eve must be willing to walk beside the mad water.

Old Rench was the last one out. As they helped their leader forth, having bandaged his broken head, he turned to glance once more at his daughter, where she leaned down from the ladder, weapon in hand, to see that the vanquished behaved themselves.

"Look at 'er," he mourned; "she's got that caliker coat I had to buy her wropped 'round her yit. Ever' one o' our guns 's been under water, an' she's a-threatenin' us with the pistol thot raily wasn't no part o' her Christmas gif'!"

WHY HE REFUSED

A young theologian named Fiddle Refused to accept his degree. "For," said he, "'tis enough to be Fiddle Without being Fiddle, D. D."