

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 dully 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 covered hair from the animals' flanks 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 wavy band, 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 about 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 gold curls peeped from under the hood of the covered horse, and 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 mule 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 Clinton'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 Clinton 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 wilderness 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 raising 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, while, every will we do now?" cried Clint as he saw what had happened. And Bessie, thoroughly frightened, began crying bitterly.

Never mind, little one; I'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, she noticed that the 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 years of age, with dark, curly hair and full beards, 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 tucked 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 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, that's ole Berger's blacksmith shop, over at Milley's store, but it's nigh three miles from here. What'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 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 curus-like ter see a woman travellin' alone sitch weather." Then after an almost imperceptible pause, as though for explanation, he continued: "But it's lucky we fellers happened along; it is, by giner! 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 chaw'n' erbout?" Mike's Rob's cabin over there a few steps, back o' them persimmons. Then, turning to Faith: "Miss, it's goin' ter be pretty rough weather tonight, an' I reckon er cabin would be right comf'able ter camp'n' 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 home in Indiana. Yer wot come ter bid ther—you an' them kids—if yer card ther."

"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-kind friends o' ours an'. 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 hide 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'."

"Facts," said Bessie, clinging to her sister's skirts as she made preparations for the evening meal, "this is 'mose' 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



THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

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 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' o'ental mule on yer self. We want to carry it back where it cum from 'fore this snow gets 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 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 warning 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; that's Rob Desmond got back, sure as shootin'!"

"Yer 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.

"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 real 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 little cheer o' some kind at Christmas time."

Then after a few minutes of hurried-conference the two entered the store. After greeting Milley, 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 eyebrows. "Oh, nothin' much, 'cept that ole Blier's sold out an' left. An'—lemme see—yes, that's Super, he got throwed an' broke his collar bone, an' us galoots has been doin' wot we could ter patch 'im up. Waal, an' then," with a wary look, "that'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 Indiana?"

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

"I reckon hearin' 'bout yer claim has kinder liked 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 sposed yer heard all about it 'fore this," said Jim. "Why, yer see, yer claim has been kinder took. A family moved inter yer shanty. Yes, they have, by giner!" 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 visiting my

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 fer 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 plenty fer him to get off with, I imagine. I kin see him a-gittin' madder 'n ever an' ridin' 'like all perished 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' sitch tricks fer Christmas presents fer them kids an' puttin' 'em in five o' our own fer somethin' neat fer that leetle woman?"

"The very idee! By thump! I kin remember how Noxy's art an' th' whistles an' sitch do-funnies us ter stir me up when I was a kid back in Jackson county at Christmas time. Yer a plumb genius, Jim, yer air, by giner!"

Meantime Rob Desmond, his mind filled with righteous wrath against the unprincipled wretch who had dared "jump his claim," was nearing his cabin. In his anger snow and cutting winds 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, tum right here an' make er wagon well, an' if you can spare 'em, just 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 personage for whom she had been calling.

"Where's your 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 heben," 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,

"to be in spirit with the season," he had apologized to Milley. These he placed in Bessie's hands and watched the expression of delight that illuminated the child's face. She had hardly done thanking him when the door opened and Faith entered. Her eyes met Desmond's in one long, searching glance, then she turned white and leaned against the wall. Rob let his hat fall to the floor as he hastened toward the agitated girl.

"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 buffalo 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 do not," Bessie whispered back as well as she could with her mouth full. "He's awful nice, an' I duss he's a relation to Santa Claus. See what he dibbed 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 freight 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:

"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 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 galoot! I wish ole Christmas'd drop a jewel like that inter my stockin's."

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.

THE DOOR OPENED AND FAITH ENTERED.