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CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE GULCH.

ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE IN NEW YORK HERALD.

I.

The mines had been shut down for six weeks and money in the camp was scarce. Bad weather had set in early and the untimed rain found its way through the roof of many a cabin. There was beginning to be sickness. In the cabin of Sandy Carson there was a little girl—the only little girl in the camp—very ill. A cold at first, then a fever, had come and after day after day little Nellie Carson, whose mother, whose mother had loved her and spoiled her since the first day of her arrival, steadily grew worse and wasted until the whole camp spoke in whispers, even up at the Red Light, where they were gambling.

Sandy Carson and his wife, with their one child, had arrived at the camp late in the fall, with barely enough money to pay the tentmaster who brought them and there had been little money since. As stated at the beginning, money in the camp was scarce, but it was, perhaps, more so in the Carson cabin than under any other roof in the Gulch. This fact had made no difference to Dr. Dick, who practiced medicine between times. He remained with the Carsons day and night, almost, and the miners knew that he would save Nellie if human skill could avail.

They were as anxious as he to do what they could for the child and had ordered some penny luxuries by the stage that came down twice a week from Green Valley, and once, by Dr. Dick's advice, they had summoned a great physician from the city, who had charged them \$100, only to tell them that Dr. Dick was doing all that anybody living could do and that the fever must run its course.

To Dr. Dick, who now hung over the little sufferer's bed and watched the fluttering breath, and felt the little, hot, wasted hand, it seemed that it came, was about run. The parents, exhausted with watching, were in the next room asleep. His patient had been delirious at times and as he leaned over her she began muttering:

"Is it Christmas yet, mamma?" she whispered. "You said I could have a doll when Christmas came and I'll be out of here in three minutes."

"I have! I have—take mine!" came from different parts of the room.

"I've got the best horse in camp," said a heavy-shouldered man named Slag, "I'll have her here by the time you're ready, and he disappeared without waiting for reply.

"The Kid will need money—chip in, boys," said another, holding out his hat.

The coins rattled into it while the boy was making his only preparation for the ride—drawing on an oil-skin coat called a slicker, loaned him by one of the men. When the hat, heavy with silver, was handed to him he passed it over to Dr. Dick.

"Give that to her folks," he said. "They need it. I'll pay for the doll myself." And without stopping for reply or comment he hurried out to where Slag was waiting with a large, handsome mare that was teasing her head and stamping in the falling rain.

"She'll take you there and back if any horse can tonight," said Slag.

The miners crowded out to see him off. It was already dark and the rain was falling heavily.

"Hold her up stream, Kid, when you ford," called one. "Never let her head get down stream."

"You'd better lead her when you get to Long Chim," said another. "The road must be out out bad there. She might go over"

"Nance knows every foot of the way," said Slag. "He don't need to lead her none."

"Take my gun, Kid," said a big-bearded fellow called "Whiskers," holding up an immense revolver.

"Too heavy. Got one, thank you. Good-bye, boys. I'll be back by daylight if I come at all," and with a signal to the restless mare the boy bounded away into the night and rain. The men, listening in silence, heard the splash of the mare's feet until he reached the woods.

"That Kid's a brack," said Whiskers "but I wish he'd taken my gun."

"I don't believe there's a horse in the camp that would carry a grown man there and back tonight, and the Kid here wouldn't care to risk it, I reckon."

"Let the Kid talk for himself," answered a brisk voice, and a boyish figure stepped out facing Dr. Dick. "What's wanted at Green Valley?"

The doctor looked at his questioner. The boy could not be more than 17, and was slight for his age. He was supposed to be a runaway and had drifted into camp one day from the dance, he reckoned, but he had been mining and gambling and appeared to be an expert at both. He gave him the name of Ellis, but the men had christened him the Kid, and when little Nellie came he had disappeared without waiting for reply. Since her illness he had gambled very little. During the last few days none at all.

"Well," said Dr. Dick, slowly, as he looked at the slender figure, "perhaps it is nothing that will do any good, but tomorrow will be Christmas and the little girl has been promised a doll, and remembers it's a-much even in her fever. She is talking and raving about it, and when the change comes, if she is conscious, any disappointment would be bad, of course, and I thought maybe if we had the doll—a big doll—to put right before her—that—perhaps—"

The boy wheeled, facing the listening men. "Who's got a horse?" he demanded. "Get me a good horse and I'll be out of here in three minutes."

"I have! I have—take mine!" came from different parts of the room.

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to swim, I mean?"

"Three times. They'll be higher still going back."

"Dark, ain't it? Could you see any at all?"

"Just the tree tops a little, but the mare knows the road."

"Do you think you'll get back all right?"

"I've got to. Say, run that string up over my shoulder. Tiptoe, that'll stay, I guess. Now take out your money and let that sack to my belt. That'll do; good night."

"Wait a minute," called the clerk. "Here, take this to the little girl as a merry Christmas from me."

He went to a showcase and took out a beautiful shiny breastpin and a pair of earrings, all on a card together.

"I can slip these in the package all right," he said. "I saved what they cost by not going to a dance tonight, and maybe they'll help some, too."

"Oh, sure!" said the Kid, "girls always like jewelry. Thank you."

He hurried out to where the big mare was standing in the rain, starting into the lighted street.

"I've got to try it again, Nance, old girl," he said. "We had a hard pull coming over and I'll be worse going back, but we've got to get there. Nellie Carson's got to have this doll and jewelry tomorrow morning. She'll die if she don't get it. Nance, and we're not going to let Nellie die if we can help it."

The noble mare, who was a mass of mud like himself, whinnied a little and seemed to understand. A moment later he was dashing back down the street into the blackness that lay between him and the little girl, who was battling with death in Sandy Carson's cabin. As he sped along he could see her round, sunny face as she had looked before her illness, and he could see beside it another face—the face of another Nellie—his little sister back in the east, whom he had not seen for two years. He had idolized her, but he remembered bitterly how even his love for her had not been strong enough to keep him out of bad company, and how when his father had reproved him he had fled from his home in anger and never returned. He had spent a year at another camp before coming to the Gulch, and he had always been lucky, but the memory of little sister Nellie had never dimmed. It was for this reason that when Carson had become his pet, and because of this that during her illness he had led a better life. He could not bear the thought of her dying, and he shuddered to think that even if he reached the Gulch safely he might not be in time. He urged the mare forward. There was a fairly good stretch of road for some distance out of Green Valley and they were making good headway. Then they entered the heavy woods and the road became slippery. He was obliged to go slower here and let the mare pick her way. A mile further on there was a swift stream that they had forded with difficulty. He knew that it was still rising, and he was anxious to get there as soon as possible. The darkness in the woods was intense and he was compelled to trust to the mare entirely. The faithful animal kept steadily on, now on one side of the road, now on the other, seeming to know by instinct the safest path.

He could hear the stream roaring before they got to it.

"It will be a tough pull, Nance," he reflected, "but we've got to make it."

He could not tell, in the darkness, when they had reached the brink, until he felt the mare plunge forward and the water rise about his legs, and he was compelled to trust to the mare's judgment.

He felt her struggling powerfully under him, but he could have no means of knowing when they were near the other bank. Suddenly it seemed to him that they had drifted down out of the open road, and thick woods were on both sides. If they were between the steep banks they were lost. He

leaned forward, striving to pierce a little way into the blackness. All at once he felt a branch sweep across his face. They were in the woods! At the same instant the mare stopped swimming. She had given up the struggle! but, no, for he felt her plunging and battling for a foothold on solid ground. They had reached the other bank, and she was climbing where it was steep and slippery. He gave her free rein, and all at once he found himself saying a prayer.

"God help me to reach The Gulch!" he whispered. "God help me to reach Nellie in time!"

He clung to the struggling mare's mane, and after what seemed an eternity to the boy, he felt that they had reached the level ground. Then he knew, from the branches against his face, that they were in the woods, and a little later that they were back in the road.

"Good Nance!" he said, patting her neck; "good, beautiful Nance!"

There was better going here again and for another five miles they did very well. They forded the second stream, which was not so swift. Just beyond was a stretch of hilly, rough road, and it was here that the Green Valley stage had been fired upon. He had not feared a hold-up, for he thought highwaymen would hardly expect prey on such a night. The hills were slippery and the mare tumbled slowly from side to side among the boulders. As they reached the upper plane and a more level stretch of road she settled once more into the swinging gallop with which she had covered each bit of decent going. He noticed that the rain had well nigh ceased and that there seemed to be a breaking in the sky. Perhaps it would be clear and sunny for Christmas. For a moment he forgot that darkness and danger shut him in, when suddenly the mare gave a snort and plunged so quickly to one side that the Kid was almost unseated. Then his heart stood still, for he heard men's muffled voices, and then a sharp, quick call of "Halt!"

The Kid imagined he saw the outlines of a man at Nance's head.

"Let go of that! you scoundrel!" he screamed and drove his heels against the mare's side. There was a smothered curse as Nance tore her head free and dashed forward. The Kid saw the dark outline again as he passed and then he heard horses' hoofs behind him in pursuit.

The light in the sky was getting somewhat stronger and the rain had almost entirely ceased. They were on high, open ground and the boy felt that they could see his farm against the horizon.

"Good Nance, beautiful Nance," he whispered and repeated again and again the low signal that urged her forward. "We must beat these cutthroats; we must get to The Gulch with Nellie's doll. You can do it, Nance! You can do it! God will help you to do it, Nance. O God, if you will help Nance to beat these cutthroats I will be a better boy. I will write home and I will never touch another card. Only help Nance to get there in time with Nellie's doll!"

"We are going to do it, Nance!" he murmured, and then suddenly from behind came two sharp reports on the night. The Kid felt his right shoulder shrink with a fierce pain for a moment and grew numb.

"Nance! O Nance, they have shot me!"

The mare had bounded forward at the shots and was now running wildly.

"Keep it up, Nance—keep it up. I'll hang on if I can. O God, help me to hang on!"

He wound his hands to the saddle with the brittle rein and pulled the end through tight with his teeth. Then he leaned forward and closed his eyes, for he was growing faint. Presently he felt the mare's forefeet plunge downward and a moment later the cold water was once more about his legs. They had reached the last ford.

"Head up stream, Nance, head up stream, old girl," he muttered faintly and then the night and the roar of water, and the sound of distant hoofs whirled and mingled unblended into blackness and silence.

III.

The Carson cabin was a few hundred yards from the red light on the Green Valley road. A group of men were gathered about its humble door, waiting. Waiting for dawn, waiting for the word that came now and then from the little fever-wasted girl within, waiting for the splash of hoofs that would announce the Kid's return. They had been there since 3 o'clock. The rain had ceased and the sky was almost clear. They talked little and in whispers, and when Dr. Dick came out and spoke to them they hung upon his words. It was after 5 o'clock now and the world was getting gray. Some of the men arose and at times walked as far as the edge of the woods to listen. They returned silently, and then others would get up and also return.

"He ought to be comin' by now," said Slag, who had scarcely spoken before. "It's a mighty bad ed-of the creek wa'n't too high so they—so's they couldn't get across, though, of course, they'd try it. That Kid an' Nance 'ud try anything."

This was the first suggestion that any one had made aloud that perhaps the Kid might not return and it cast an added gloom over the silent group. Dr. Dick came to the door just then. He stood outside, listening anxiously.

"She is between life and death," he whispered. "She is likely to wake any moment now. If only the boy would come!" Then he went back and there was another time of silence and hungry waiting. By and by the door opened more quickly than usual and he stepped out again.

"She is waking," he whispered. "If the boy doesn't come now it will be too late."

He peered down the dim road, listening intently. The morning was very still and the least sound could be heard. All at once from the edge of the woods there came a call. It was from two men who had walked down the road to listen.

"He's comin'!" they cried. "We can hear the hoofs!"

The men leaped to their feet and listened. Far down the road, somewhere in the woods, they could hear the sound, too. Slag ran a few steps forward.

"That's Nance!" he exclaimed, under his breath, "I know her gait!"

They saw the two men returning on the run, and then, out of the woods behind them came the horse. She passed them and came straight to Slag, who had stepped forward to meet her. She was a mass of mud, and upon her back there hung another mud-covered object that made no movement or sound.

"Kid! Kid!" said Whiskers, shaking him, "are you asleep? Did you bring the doll?"

There was no answer. Then they saw that his hands were bound to the saddle. In a second they had lifted him down and stripped off the slicker. They saw the package containing the doll, and cutting it from him handed it to Dr. Dick who turned hastily with it into the cabin, and a moment later returned.

"The boy is hurt," he said briefly. "There was blood on the package."

He knelt down in the dim light and laid his ear to the Kid's heart.

"Carry him over to the Red Light!" he commanded. "Quick!"

Whiskers lifted the slender form in his arms and carried it as he would an infant.

Three hours later the sweet Christmas sunlight was shining into the upper south room of the Red Light, where the Kid was lying. Dr. Dick was bending over him, and a silent group was gathered in the hallway, peering through the open door. The boy, opening his eyes, did not realize at first where he was. Then he said, faintly:

"Did I make it in time, Doc? Was the doll all right, and—and will she—will she get well?"

"Yes, my boy, you saved her. She will get well. And you will get well, too, Kid, God bless you!"

And there was not one of the silent listening group outside but repeated fervently, "God bless him! God bless the Kid!"



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