Christmas on Rocky Ridge.

By A. H. GIBSON.

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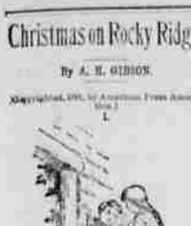
I.



IVY WAS HIS FAVORITE LITTLE NURSE.

In a little military cabin, nestling like a bird's nest among the pines and cedars on Rocky Ridge, Milton Fisher was breathing his last.

Twenty years ago, driven by the beckoning of the dying man—the old gray haired doctor from over in the valley and True and Ivy, Fisher's motherless children.

True was a robust, manly looking boy of fourteen, while his sister, two years younger, was a sweet, earnest faced child, with eyes like the violets blooming in the canyon, and hair like the warmest sunbeams gilding the crests of the Rockies. The old doctor's eyes moistened when they rested pityingly upon the children, as sure by he had orphans indeed, as they knelt and tearfully listened to their father's last words.

"True," the dying man said, placing his thin hand on the lad's brown curls, "you and Ivy stick to each other and stick to the little claim in the canyon. Try not to feel too lonesome when your dad's gone. Your Uncle Jim will come as soon as he leaves the west. The doctor has given me his promise to write to Jim, and I know he'll come back and look after you. Remember to stick to the claim, for, mind I tell you, you'll find a little gold there some time. Stay here in the cabin till Jim comes, then he'll go to work on the claim. He'll find the gold, for it's there."

And with his old faith in the valuable gold in the claim in this canyon strong as ever, Milton Fisher passed away.

It was a hard struggle for these lonely children to fight life's battle without father or mother, but they went bravely to work to make the most of their situation.

The Fishers were very poor. Two years before Milton Fisher, whose fearless hard luck had always seemed to dog with remorseless persistency, had a good six months' tramp, starting from Montana to Colorado. They had brought nothing but themselves and a few household goods in a dilapidated looking covered wagon, drawn by one mule and a stout Indian pony.

After the father's death some of the settlers in the valley tried to persuade Ivy to leave the isolated old cabin on Rocky Ridge. But she would not go. When Ivy tried to do so she would say:

"No, True and I must stick together, Uncle Jim said to. I know we're mighty poor, but we can work, and I know we'll get along some way till Uncle Jim comes."

True had intended to rent a piece of land in the valley and put in a small crop, but the uncle fell from the cliff and broke his neck, so he was forced to do something else. He hired himself to a farmer three miles distant to help clear out some irrigating ditches. He did not receive a man's wages for his services, and considering the cost of living in that part of the west his earnings amounted to a mere pittance.

But Ivy was a little household economist, and they managed to get along much better than might have been imagined until True met with an accident.

While helping the farmer to split some timbers the ax had slipped, cutting his foot so badly as to lay him up for several weeks. Ivy was his faithful little nurse, and was ever ready to cheer him up when his patience showed signs of giving out.

It was in the fall of the year when True cut his foot. The deadwood trees began to shed their foliage, but Uncle Jim had not come yet.

The doctor had written three letters, addressing them to a frontier postoffice in Wyoming, where Jim Fisher had been last heard from.

But no answer came back, and as Jim was a kind of scout, spending his time in hunting, trapping and mining, it was likely that his mail would be thrown away. Now that True was disabled, the lonely Fisher children on Rocky Ridge felt their isolation and orphanage more keenly, and longed for the presence of Uncle Jim.

Autumn gave place to winter chill, but brought no tidings of the wanderer.

True's foot proved more stubborn about healing than had at first been predicted. A heavy cold added to his trouble, and Christmas eve found him still confined to the cabin.

"Oh, dear!" he sighed dolefully. "Somebody's Christmas, and here I am of no account yet. I hoped all along I'd be able to work before this and make a little Christmas for you. It won't seem a bit like Christmas to be locked up this way. I meant to make it seem like old times to you, Ivy."

It was hard for the energetic boy to be there so helpless, and there were many tearful moments in one of the years ending up "old times." Ivy realized this in a vague kind of way, but resolutely repeating the hope she returned gaily:

"Try not to mind, True. We'll make it as happy a Christmas as we can. When Uncle Jim gets back we'll make up to you all you've missed by lying here so long."

"I don't believe that Uncle Jim is ever coming back, Ivy."

"Oh, yes he is, True! Don't use bad words." she sought to encourage him.

"I hadn't ought to, I know, when you are so good to me, and wait on me as if I was a baby. But I can't much better. I've been pinned up here so long with this one foot," he said gloomily.

"Don't feel, True. We'll have a nice Christmas yet."

"I ought to be ashamed to worry when you are so patient, and I will try hard to be any more."

"May be God won't forget us away up here on Rocky Ridge this Christmas. Now, try to sleep, True." And kissing him softly she smoothed the covers over him. "You'll feel better when you wake up, then I'll give you some supper."

She sang softly alone her simple homelike hymn, while the boy's regular breathing told her that he slept.

"Poor True!" she said to herself. "I wish I had something nice to cheer him up on Christmas. Not being well makes him feel more disappointed like. I do wish."

She laid aside the old stockings which she was mending for True, then she arose and went to the little window and leaned out. Far up on the Rockies brown patches were the last accumulations of eternal snows. The sun, well down the western slope, touched them into dazzling opalescent colors. Something of the beauty and solemnity of the mountain scenery stirred the soul of the little girl, and she murmured to herself:

"It is Christmas eve, and he was poor, too—was born in a manger, the good book says. But how lovely he has made the whole earth!"

Then her thoughts returned to True.

"If I just had something good for True's supper I'd feel right better. He's sick and discouraged like and don't relish potatoes, cornbread and molasses, and that's the best there is in the cabin. I might ride down to Duffer's store and ask him to let me have an apple or orange. I expect they're sold out now and he's mighty close. But maybe if I'd go and ask him he'd let me have something for True. I hate to face old Duffer, he's so cranky, but it's for True, and I'll go."

Putting a few sticks of wood on the fireplace she wrapped an old faded cotton around her head and prepared to leave the cabin.

"He won't wake before I get back," she said, looking toward the couch. "I'll make Bonny travel her best."

II.

IVY WAS RIDE OFTENEST DOWN THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

Bonny was grazing in the canyon, where the sandy shrubs and grasses managed to keep the chill of winter up on the ridge and the heights above the cabin. She was easily caught, and Ivy flung an expert rider's seat upon her along down the mountain trail which led to Duffer's store.

Josh Duffer was a crusty old fellow, who kept a grocery and general notion store next door to a saloon in the outskirts of the settlement in the valley. The Fisher children had never dealt with Duffer. He was neither fond nor regarded with a good profit on all his sales that they had been enticed to do their trading at the small mining town seven miles distant from Rocky Ridge.

The air was sharp, and Ivy's thinly clad figure felt the chilliness keenly, but the thought of how glad she was going to make the sick boy made her almost dumb to the discomfort of her long, cold ride down the mountain.

As she approached Duffer's store she noticed that the saloon next door was crowded with rough men, drinking and yelling in a reckless manner.

She shuddered at the sight, and her feet tingled was to ride away as fast as Bonny could carry her. But she remembered True, and dismounting she hitched the pony near the door and entered.

The store was quite deserted, save by the unprepossessing proprietor himself and a tall, lean boy, who occupied an empty soap box by the rusty stove.

Duffer stood behind the counter, and as Ivy came toward him he fixed his lowering gray eyes upon her with a stare that was repellent.

"Oh, no!" she began, nervously fingering one ragged edged tie ends, "I don't want to dispatch her business and hurry home. my brother's laid up in the cabin—he's been sick a long time—and I want to get something nice for his Christmas, an orange or apples," and she looked longingly at the display of fruits and candies arranged on the shelves.

"Have you any money?" the merchant asked shortly.

"No, sir," and her face fell despairingly.

"Then how'd you expect to get anything? I'm done giving my credit lookout," he announced savagely.

Ivy's face flushed hotly, but it was her blue eyes appealingly to the man's hard, cold visage she said, "You might let me have one of them big oranges, and I could pay you in work for it."

"I'd like to know what you could do for me," he remarked scornfully.

"I could come down here and scrub your floor, wash your windows, clean up your store and do lots of things if you let me," she answered, looking at the dirty window and windows, which had evidently not taken a bath for twelve months or more.

"Yer Nill Fisher's brats gal, hain't yer?" he asked, ignoring her reference to the uncleanliness of his establishment.

"Yes, sir," she answered, resentment from the expression of his countenance that she had appealed to him in vain.

"Yer dad cured me, and it's high time yer kin was doin something for mine account." he said roughly.

"I believe he's my pap my he owed you," she retorted.

"I had a second sign yer Fishers for thirty dollars. I'm for Bills yer Uncle Jim up when he went up for Wyoming. Yer dad wouldn't take it for that trips Jim got. I was yer friend fer yer sake sich security, but yer dad was allus so durned cantin' of stickin gold on that claim of him in the cavern that I kinder believed in him. The sute orfy been paid two months ago, but I'm been kinder waitin fer give yer kids a chance fer settle without dunnin. But I reckon yer 'lout so dishonest as yer dad."

"My pap wasn't dishonest," she cried spiritually. "I'd pose yap that Uncle Jim would be back and pay it himself. He ought to have been five months ago."

"Yer Uncle Jim has shifted out for good, air yer not likely ever see no sign back in these parts again. But yer dad's property stands good for my thirty dollars' worth o' traps that Jim Fisher put off with. In that either yer ekt up hyar a bit agin yer ow?"

"Yes, sir, it's all the home we have left."

"Well, I'll take the critter and call it square."

"Oh, please, sir," pleaded Ivy, unable to keep the tears back, "don't take Bonny! She's all that's left True and me. We couldn't live without her, indeed we couldn't!"

Tears and pleading, however, were of no avail in moving the Shylock nature of old Josh Duffer. Calling the boy for from the soap box, he ordered him to lead Bonny away.

As the boy left the store to do his bidding, Duffer turned to Ivy, saying:

"Come, sissy! Drop up now. Our Cassie will be comin in soon, an I hain't be managed by a cryin gal. You'd best run on home now."

With an imploring look her head to look at the shelves laden for the holiday trade, Ivy walked out of the store. She passed on the stoop, to take a last look at her favorite, but the boy had already disappeared from view with her.

With her young heart in a tumult of fresh troubles, she turned away from the store. It was bad enough to return to True without a thing for his Christmas, thought, but how Bonny would to have Duffer taken on a debt of which she knew nothing.

III.

About a half mile from Duffer' store she cut down on a rough cut mountain trail to give her time to cool. How would she go back to True and report the loss of Bonny? She knew the intelligent would worry sick for him, so much did he love the pony.

Down the trail came a half dozen horsemen. Their rawhide trimmed saddles, as well as their general costumes, were tinged with the cattle ranges. They belonged to Murray's "outfit," in charge of a large cattle ranch over in Deer Creek valley, and were on their way to celebrate Christmas eve in "roaring style" at Fisher's saloon, next door to Duffer' store.

Suddenly Jack Isley and Ben Spiker, who were riding ahead, came to a halt, splashing from their saddles they reached and yanked an object by the roadside.

When the cattle rangers rode up they saw Jack and Ben bending over a small figure by the roadside.

"What is it?"

"A little gal, an once fainted dead away," answered Spiker, who was trying to restore the unconscious child.

Presently she recovered, and, sitting up, glanced wonderingly at the rough but kindly faces bent over her so full of sympathy.

"Don't be afraid, Sweetheart, you be enough friends," Spiker reassured her.

Ivy was trembling with the cold, and Jack Isley took his coat off and wrapped it snugly around the little girl.

"Tout, sweetheart, can'll keep you a lot more comfortable. Now, tell us what yer was goin'."

"Home," she answered simply.

"An where is that?"

"On Rocky Ridge."

"Oh!" with a whistle. "Yer Nill Fisher's brats gal, I Tow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wot brings yer out hyar a-foot an erlone an fer from home?" inquired Spiker.

"My brother's sick at the cabin, and I went down to Duffer' store to get him a present for his Christmas," she answered explain. "I rode Bonny, my pony, lor — and he broke down and begin to cry bitterly.

"A LITTLE GAL, AN ONCE FAINTED DEAD AWAY."

These rough fellows built on the frozen ground by her side and spoke comfortingly to the poor child. The former called, and by degrees they succeeded in drawing the whole story from her.

When Ivy had finished the simple but pathetic recital of her troubles, Jack said:

"Fellers, a man wo'll treat a little orphan gal so ill-fed mean ought to be taught a lesson."

"That he shall" agreed his companions.

"He orta now a committee to wait on him."

"An orter put him on his duty to him."

"An show him how an citizens o' ther U.S. land mine should conduct himself toward them as is orphans indeed."

"An specially on Christmas times, when ther shud hum down from Detiles an wish cheerful peace an yearth good will to men, yer know."

"Oh, yes! we were powerful an onin Sorry ye," remarked Spiker, admiringly.

"Jack, yer mined yer cattle when yer took for compodition, and it provides. I make or motion that an galoots rides up to the saloon fer a committee fer Deer's a Christmas sermon for ole Josh Duffer."

For reply the cowboys tossed up their sombreros and gave three shouts for "yer sweet, Jack Isley."

"Hyer, sweetheart," said Spiker to Ivy, "yer must ride behind me back fer ole Duffer. We're parties an jurisprudence constituted, an yer wrongs air to be righted. It's Christmas eve, an Parson Isley will open services in a jiffy for ther benefit of ole cantilint Duffer."

On saying, Ivy was assisted to a seat behind Spiker, and they were soon riding rapidly toward the settlement.

"Look hyer!" commanded Jack Isley, as they approached the store, "don't let me hitch my pinto o' yer hangin round ol Josh's cattle hole while matter's in progress. The parson has spoken!"

When Ivy reached her store door she mounted and entered, Ivy and Spiker with Ivy in the lead, followed by the rest of Murray's unmanners.

"Hello Ole Duff!" roared Isley. "It

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