

# FOUNTAIN OF FRIENDSHIP

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LOUDS of dust were stirred up by the great iron-tired wheels of the prairie schooner as the weary oxen struggled up the slight rise. Prudence Downey floundered along in the hot sand, grateful for the brief shade afforded by the corner of the lurching covered wagon.

Her brother Hedley shouted encouragement to the oxen, his voice sounding cracked and flat in the desert stillness. At the top of the rise, he drew over into one of the ruts and cried, "Whoa!" Prudy walked forward to see if he was making room for another wagon to pass.

Her alert blue eyes took in the scene ahead at a glance. The high pinnacle of rock stood alone on the parched plain and marked the dividing point of two sets of tracks. One set ran south through white alkali sinks. The other tracks hugged the base of a broken range to the north—blistered red and yellow mountains that shimmered in the heat waves.

Directly below them a pitching wagon climbed the rise on which they had halted. An emaciated woman and a hollow-cheeked girl about Prudy's age trudged beside two lean oxen. Defeat was written in every

line of the two approaching strangers—in their drooping shoulders, their downcast faces, their lagging steps.

“Now don’t go a-starting a conversation,” Hedley said. “We got no time to lose if we’re a-going to catch our wagon train.”

Prudy glanced at her brother in surprise. The tone, the words were not like him. Only a year her senior, he seemed to have aged years in the past few weeks. Small wonder, thought Prudy. He was too young for such responsibility. But it wasn’t the aging which had worried Prudy. As Hedley’s browned face had grown more gaunt, his eyes more haggard, all the kindness had drained out of him, too. Somehow, he had hardened, and that concerned Prudy most of all.

As the wagon came closer, Prudy could hear a grinding and grating sound that sometimes became a screech. She noticed that the rear right wheel of the approaching prairie schooner sometimes refused to turn at all. It dragged through the sand, making it harder for the oxen.

The woman and girl did not raise their heads as they turned the oxen aside to pass. Prudy’s heart was pinched by their indifference, because she recognized it as the indifference of utter weariness.

“Pardon me,” Prudy said impulsively. “But wouldn’t it make it easier if that rear wheel were greased?”

The sunbonnet lifted, and Prudy saw the woman’s

eyes snap. "Now aren't you right smart?" she asked sharply.

"I realize you don't have any grease," Prudy said quickly. "But we have a little to spare. I know my brother would be glad to grease your wheel."

The woman stared at Prudy's eager, flushed face, and then two tears slid down her browned cheeks. "Forgive me, child. I'm so plumb tuckered out, I can't reco'nize kindness when it strikes me. I'd be mighty grateful to your brother if he would."

Prudy was glad the woman did not notice Hedley's dark glance of annoyance. Time was so precious!

The woman walked over to speak to Prudy's mother, who was driving the oxen because she had grown too tired to walk. The girl approached Prudy, raising large dark eyes.

"You must excuse Mother," she said anxiously. "She's not usually like this. But . . . we lost my father." The girl waved indefinitely at mountains which purpled away in the western distance.

"There's so much cholera in the emigrant trains," Prudy said sympathetically. "My father got it, too, . . . and nothing we could do . . ."

"I understand," said the girl.

"We lost the wagon train we were with," Prudy explained. "We broke a whippetree, and we had to stop while Hedley made one."

"Planning on taking the south fork at Pinnacle Rock?" asked the girl.

Prudy nodded. "We have only one barrel of

water left. We have to get more at Sultry Springs.”

The other girl glanced up quickly. “We came that way. Sultry Springs is dry.” She added in a hoarse whisper, “Maybe you’d find water on the north fork. I don’t know.”

Hedley had finished greasing the wheel. Smiling, the woman and girl thanked them.

“You’ll find that wagon train only one day ahead of you,” said the girl.

The wheel no longer creaked or dragged. Watching its progress, Prudy saw that the woman and girl no longer stared at the ground. They walked erect, their eyes ahead. She felt a little surge of triumph in realizing that she had helped raise their spirits.

When she turned, she saw Hedley staring blankly at a dark splotch beneath their wagon. Suddenly he ran toward the backboard, climbed over it, and when Prudy reached the rear of the wagon, Hedley was shaking a barrel, his face almost boyish in its despair.

“Plug came out of our last keg of water! Not a drop left! And while our oxen are just about all in, you stand gossiping—”

“Those strangers needed our help,” said Prudence.

“We got to get to Sultry Springs before night-fall.”

“That woman and girl came by the south fork, Hedley. Sultry Springs is dry.”

He dropped the barrel, his eyes panicky. “Dry?”

“The girl thought we might find water on the north fork.”

"No," he said hoarsely. "The emigrants' guide does not say anything about water on the north fork. This is what we get because you got to delay us to gossip with every stranger we meet."

Prudy's eyes stung. "Hedley, you're upset. Besides, we'd have taken the south fork if I hadn't talked to that girl."

"Maybe that's true," he said hotly, "but you had no excuse to stand jawing for a half hour yesterday with that grizzled old trader."

"But he was hungry for someone to talk to, Hedley. His face lighted up so when I stopped to talk to him. Besides, he had so many interesting things to say about the country ahead."

"Interesting maybe, but time-wasteful."

She watched with stinging eyes as he swung to the ground. Timidly, she touched his arm. He turned, frowning.

"Hedley, don't let's . . . get hard. No matter how bad things are. If you can't spare time for a kind word or a kind act along the trail, then you're not really living."

He stared at her, unmoved. "You got to watch out for yourself. You can't be always shouldering others' troubles."

He strode ahead. He did not speak when he took the north fork at Pinnacle Rock or during the hours when they wended their way along the base of the towering cliffs. Heat was reflected from the painted cliffs as from a furnace. More than once Prudy glanced anxiously at her mother, for her mother's

lips were pressed tightly together now. But the girl said nothing. She knew her mother's thirst but there was nothing she could do.

Finally, Hedley stopped the oxen. His eyes were wild with fright. Prudy trudged forward, and a chill slid down her back. The tongues of the oxen were lolling from their mouths, and they were shaking.

"Only one day separates us from our wagon train," Hedley croaked hoarsely. "But the oxen ain't going to make it unless they get water."

Prudy's eyes swept the shriveled plain, and then darted along the slopes above. Dry canyons, eroded by the spring cloudbursts of centuries. Sagebrush, cactus, and brown grass—save in one canyon where there was a single tip of a green tree.

"Unharness one of the oxen," Prudy said quickly. "Lash a keg to his back, somehow. I think I know where there's water."

Hedley protested as she led the way up a dry canyon. Two turns, three—with no sign of water. Still Prudy insisted on continuing, though Hedley was having more and more trouble leading the ox over the rough stones. Half an hour later they came to damp sand where water had run not many hours before; beyond that a quarter of a mile was a clear stream.

They drank, and let the animal drink, and then filled their keg with water. The next time Prudy lowered her head to drink, Hedley pushed her face in it. Sputtering, Prudy put her hand in the stream

to splash her brother. Suddenly, she straightened, her eyes alight.

“Why, Hedley, you’re laughing! It’s been weeks since you’ve—”

“Reckon I got a reason for laughing!” Except for the lean brownness of his face, he looked almost boyish again. “Our worst troubles are over! Prudy, how’d you know there was a spring up here? There’s no sign of water down below.”

Prudy’s eyes were wide and bright. “There had to be water up here! Remember that lonely, grizzled old trader I talked to yesterday? He told me a lot of useful things. Among the things he told me was this: If you find shrubbery or trees darker green than the surrounding growth—as it was in this canyon—you know there must be water there.”

“Huh!” said Hedley. “And I said you were wasting our time being friendly to folks.”