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So Much of Kindness

By ELIJAH L. JACOBS

WHEN RUTH and Evan Weston brought their two children to live on the ranch they had inherited, they felt that they were coming home. They had grown up in the region, and to them its remoteness was not isolation. Of course, at times like this, when Evan had to be gone for a week or more, Ruth was lonely. At present the windmill needed oiling.

"People call this range a desert," Evan had told her. "But there's enough kindness in it to take care of its own. You won't have any gunmen shooting up the street, and the babies won't slip under a truck. I'll find you here when I come back."

That had been yesterday morning. Yesterday had been long, today longer. Two children did not give a woman enough to do. The windmill was squealing.

Ruth had sat down to finish some mending. Her sewing basket was on the broad sill of the open window, and little Evan's sleeping garment lay across the arm of her chair, showing the small rent which she had started to sew. When she was in the act of lifting the lid from her basket, the windmill gave an unusually piercing shriek. Ruth shuddered and got up. She could not work while her ears were tortured with such sounds. She left the children playing in the next room while she ran out to wind the chain on the drum and bring the whirling vanes around, edge-on to the wind.

When she came back in, the children were still playing. She could hear little Evan's strangely mature chuckle, and three-year-old Molly's squeal of delight. It was pleasant that the children did not quarrel. She had known babies of three and five who did, but Evan and Molly seldom disagreed.

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Ruth sat down and took up the little pajamas again. As she reached for her sewing basket, Molly called, "Mother."

Ruth half turned, the lid in her hand. At the same moment she heard the whirr that speaks of death to any desert dweller, and felt a sudden sickening, burning sensation just below the elbow of her outstretched arm. With a suffocating terror, Ruth knew before she turned and saw the reptile what a disaster had befallen her. A rattler had come through the open window, crept under the tilted cover, and coiled itself in her basket. She had disturbed it when she lifted the lid. It came to her that its buzzing had been a submerged undertone in the shriek that had sent her out to stop the windmill. The snake lifted its head stiffly, and its ominous tail quivered. Ruth half fell forward from her chair to get beyond its reach. Nauseous with fright, she sank down to the floor. But she could not let go—the wound must be treated quickly or she would die. She tried to suck the poison out, but the two tiny drops of blood oozing from her skin were on the back of her arm, an inch and a half beyond the reach of her lips. She strained desperately.

Little Evan, in the door, laughed at his mother's contortions.

Ruth dropped her arm from her mouth. "Come here, Sonny," she gasped. "Suck at Mother's arm. Suck hard. And don't swallow. Spit it out!"

But the child saw his mother's face then, and screamed. Ruth coaxed. She grew desperate and commanded. Sonny cried and retreated. In an agony of haste Ruth caught him and started to hold his lips to her arm, but he was stubborn, and she saw that she could accomplish nothing. Molly added her screams to his.

Shaking, Ruth went to the upper shelf of her kitchen cabinet, where she kept the family drugs. She always had some crystals of potassium permanganate there, wrapped up with a razor blade. Some people said that to lacerate the flesh about a snake bite and rub the crystals into the wounds would neutralize the venom. Others said that there
was no merit in the treatment. It might help. She climbed
dizzily to a chair—and then remembered that Evan had lost
her snake-bite kit the last time he had gone out to shoot
doves.

She got weakly down. As she lowered herself, she tried
to remember how long people lived after being struck by a
rattler. Twenty minutes—an hour—she could not recall.
She had lived too long away from the desert.

She found herself lying on the floor where she had
fallen. At first she could not remember what had happened.
Then it came back. Her arm was swelling. How long had
she lain in a faint? She knew the dreadful weakness and
nausea might be due in part, at least, to terror, but she had
no doubt that she would die in a short time, perhaps in a
few minutes.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by the plight of her
children. Their father would not return for nine or ten
days. What would become of the babies, left alone for that
time—with their mother dead? Hunger—thirst—heat—and
there were animals in the desert that would know she
was dead. The desert that was kind to its own!

Ruth Weston staggered to her feet. She could not see
clearly, and some raucous uproar was in her ears. But she
reeled into the bedroom, to the dresser, and got her hands
on the revolver there. Then back to the door—her vision
cleared a bit. There were her babies, so terrified by their
mother’s frightful conduct that they had ceased to cry. She
lifted the weapon.

But she saw little Evan’s thrust-out jaw, and covered
her face. She had loved his little stubborn defiances. The
pistol dropped, and she sank to the floor again. A chill
shook her.

She tried to pull herself together, but she could not rise.
Her eyes caught a mottled shape.

“Sonny!” she said, as sharply as she could. She sucked
in her breath, and the little saliva on her lips. “That’s
mother’s new pet on the window. Don’t touch it! Mind
mother. Don’t touch it!”
Her head dropped. Even to save him suffering—to make her parting with her baby so harsh!

But little Evan was a stout one, and in his present mood would not be forbidden. He ran and thrust out his hand. The spring-like form darted forward, but it evidently did not hurt much. The boy shrank back, but he did not cry.

Ruth was sobbing. “Now you may pet it, Molly,” she gasped. “So much kindness, anyhow—”

She never knew whether Molly received the benison of the desert.