

Godsend to a Lady

By B. M. Bower

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Casey waved good-by to the men from Tonopah, squinted up at the sun, and got a coal-oil can of water and filled the radiator of his Ford. He rolled his bed in the tarp and tied it securely, put flour, bacon, coffee, salt, and various other small necessities of life into a box, inspected his sour-dough can and decided to empty it and start over again if hard fate drove him to sour dough. "Might bust down and have to sleep out," he meditated. "Then again I ain't liable to; and if I do I'll be goin' so fast I'll git somewhere before she stops. I'm—sure—goin' to go!" He cranked the battered car, straddled in over the edge on the driver's side, and set his feet against the pedals with the air of a man who had urgent business elsewhere. The men from Tonopah were not yet out of sight around the butte scarred with granite ledges before Casey was under way, rattling down the rough trail from Ghost Mountain and bouncing clear of the seat as the car lurched over certain rough spots.

Pinned with a safety pin to the inside pocket of the vest he wore only when he felt need of a safe and secret pocket, Casey Ryan carried a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, made payable to himself. A check for twenty-five thousand dollars in Casey's pocket was like a wild cat clawing at his imagination and spitting at every moment's delay. Casey had endured solitude and some hardship while he coaxed Ghost Mountain to reveal a little of its secret treasure. Now he wanted action, light, life, and plenty of it. While he drove he dreamed, and his dreams beckoned, urged him faster and faster.

Up over the summit of the ridge that lay between Ghost Mountain and Furnace Lake he surged with radiator bubbling. Down the long slope to the lake lying there smiling sardonically at a world it loved to trick with its moods, Casey drove as if he were winning a bet. Across that five miles of baked, yellow-white clay he raced, his Ford a-creak in every joint.

“Go it, you tin lizard,” chortled Casey. “I’ll have me a real wagon when I git to Los. She’ll be white, with red stripes along her sides and red wheels, and she’ll eat up the road and lick her chops for more. Sixty miles under her belt every time the clock strikes, or she ain’t good enough for Casey! Mebby they think they got some drivers in Californy. Meybe they *think* they have. They ain’t, though, because Casey Ryan ain’t there yet. I’ll catch that night train. Oughta be in by morning, and then you keep your eye on Casey. There’s goin’ to be a stir around Los, about to-morrow noon. I’ll have to buy some clothes, I guess. And I’ll find some nice girl with yella hair that likes pleasure, and take her out ridin’. Yeah, I’ll have to git me a swell outfit uh clothes. I’ll look the part, all right!”

Up a long, winding trail and over another summit, Casey dreamed while the stark, scarred buttes on either side regarded him with enigmatic calm. Since the first wagon train had worried over the rough deserts on their way to California, the bleak hills of Nevada had listened while prospectors dreamed aloud and cackled over their dreaming; had listened, too, while they raved in thirst and heat and madness. Inscrutably they watched Casey as he hurried by with his twenty-five thousand dollars and his pleasant pictures of soft ease.

At a dim fork in the trail Casey slowed and stopped. A boiling radiator will not forever brook neglect, and Casey brought his mind down to practical things for a space. "I can just as well take the train from Lund," he mused, while he poured in more water. "Then I can leave this bleatin' burro with Bill. He oughta give me a coupla hundred for her, anyway. No use wasting money just because you happen to have a few dollars in your pants." He filled his pipe to smoke and muse on that sensible idea and turned the nose of his Ford down the dim trail to Lund.

Eighty miles more or less straight away across the mountainous waste lay Lund, halfway up a cañon that led to higher reaches in the hills rich in silver, lead, copper, gold. Silver it was that Casey had found and sold to the men from Tonopah—and it was a freak of luck, he thought whimsically, that had led him and his Ford away over to Ghost Mountain to find their stake when they had probably been driving over millions every day that they made the stage trip from Pinnacle down to Lund. For Casey, be it known, was an old stage driver turned prospector. He had a good deal to think of while he drove, and he had time enough in which to think it.

The trail was rutted in places where the sluicing rains had driven hard across the hills; soft with sand in places where the fierce winds had swept the open. For a while the thin, wobbly track of a wagon meandered over the road, then turned off up a flat-bottomed draw and was lost in the sagebrush. Some prospector not so lucky as he, thought Casey with swift, soon-forgotten sympathy.

A coyote ran up a slope toward him, halted with forefeet planted on a rock and stared at him, ears perked like an inquisitive dog. Casey stopped, eased his rifle out of the crease in the back of the

seat cushion, chanced a shot and his luck held. He climbed out, picked up the limp gray animal, threw it into the tonneau and went on. Even with twenty-five thousand dollars in his pocket, Casey told himself that coyote hides are not to be scorned. He had seen the time when the price of a good hide meant flour and bacon and tobacco to him. He would skin it when he stopped to eat.

Eighty miles with never a soul to call good day to Casey. Nor shack nor shelter made for man, nor water to wet his lips if they cracked with thirst—unless, perchance, one of those swift downpours came riding on the wind, lashing the clouds with lightning. Then there was water, to be sure. Far ahead of Casey such a storm rolled in off the barren hills to the south. “She’s wettin’ up that red lake a-plenty,” observed Casey, squinting through the dirty windshield. “No trail around, either, on account of the lava beds. But I guess I can pull across, all right.”

Doubt was in his voice, however, and he was half minded to turn back and take the straight road to Vernal, which had been his first objective. But he discarded the idea. “No, sir, Casey Ryan never back-trailed yet. Poor time to commence now, when I got the world by the tail and a downhill pull. We’ll make out, all right—can’t be so terrible boggy with a short rain like that there. I bet,” he continued optimistically to the Ford, which was the nearest he had to human companionship, “I bet we make it in a long lope. Git along, there! Shake a hoof—’s the last time you haul Casey around.

“Casey’s goin’ to step high, wide, and handsome. Sixty miles an hour or he’ll ask for his money back. They can’t step too fast for Casey! Blue—if I git me a girl with yella hair, mebby she’ll show up better in a blue car than she will in a white and red. This here turnout has got to be tasty and have class. If she was dark—” He

shook his head at that. “No, sir, black hair grows too plenty on squaws an’ chili queens. Yella goes with Casey. Clingin’ kind with blue eyes—that’s the stuff! An’ I’ll sure show her some drivin’!”

He wondered whether he should find the girl first and buy the car to match her beauty, or buy the car first and with that lure the lady of his dreams. It was a nice question and it required thought. It was pleasant to ponder the problem, and Casey became so lost in meditation that he forgot to eat when the sun flirted with the scurrying clouds over his wind-torn automobile top.

So he came bouncing and swaying down the last mesa to the place called Red Lake. Casey had heard it spoken of with opprobrious epithets by men who had crossed it in wet weather. In dry weather it was red clay caked and checked by the sun, and wheels or hoofs stirred clouds of red dust that followed and choked the traveler. In rain it was said to be boggy, and travelers failed to travel at all.

Casey was not thinking of the lake when he drove down to it. He was seeing visions, though you would not think it to look at him; a stocky, middle-aged man who needed a shave and a hair cut, wearing cheap, dirt-stained overalls and blue shirt and square-toed shoes studded thickly on the soles with hobnails worn shiny; driving a desert-scarred Ford with most of the paint gone and a front fender cocked up and flapping crazily, and tires worn down to the fabric in places.

But his eyes were very blue and there was a humorous twist to his mouth, and the wrinkles around his eyes meant Irish laughter quite as much as squinting into the sun. If he dreamed incongruously of big, luxurious cars gorgeous in paint and nickel trim, and of slim, young women with yellow hair and blue eyes—well, stranger

dreams have been hidden away behind exteriors more unsightly than was the shell which holds the soul of Casey Ryan.

Presently the practical, everyday side of his nature nudged him into taking note of his immediate surroundings. Casey knew at a glance that half of Red Lake was wet, and that the shiny patches here and there were shallow pools of water. Moreover, out in the reddest, wettest part of it an automobile stood with its back to him, and pygmy figures were moving slowly upon either side.

“Stuck” diagnosed Casey in one word, and tucked his dream into the back of his mind even while he pulled down the gas lever a couple of notches and lunged along the muddy ruts that led straight away from the safe line of sagebrush and out upon the platterlike red expanse.

The Ford grunted and lugged down to a steady pull. Casey drove as he had driven his six horses up a steep grade in the old days, coaxing every ounce of power into action. Now he coaxed with spark and gas and somehow kept her in high, and stopped with nice judgment on a small island of harder clay within shouting distance of the car ahead. He killed the engine then and stepped down, and went picking his way carefully out to them, his heavy shoes speedily collecting great pancakes of mud that clung like glue.

“Stuck, hey? You oughta kept in the ruts, no matter if they are water-logged. You never want to turn outa the road on one of these lake beds, huntin’ dry ground. If it’s wet in the road you can bank on sinkin’ in to the hocks the minute you turn out.” He carefully removed the mud pancakes from his shoes by scraping them across

the hub of the stalled car, and edged back to stand with his arms on his hips while he surveyed the full plight of them.

“She sure is bogged down a-plenty,” he observed, grinning sympathetically.

“Could you hitch on your car, mister, and pull us out?” This was a woman’s voice, and it had an odd quality of youth and unquenchable humor that thrilled Casey, woman hungry as he was.

Casey put up a hand to his mouth and surreptitiously removed a chew of tobacco almost fresh. With some effort he pulled his feet closer together, and he lifted his old Stetson and reset it at a consciously rakish angle. He glanced at the car, behind it and in front, coming back to the flat-chested, depressed individual before him. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll get you out, all right. Sure, I will.” While he looked at the man he spoke to the woman.

“We’ve been stalled here for an hour or more,” volunteered the flat-chested one. “We was right behind the storm. Looked a sorry chance that anybody would come along for the next week or so—”

“Mister, you’re a godsend if ever there was one,” added the lady. “I’d write your name on the roster of saints in my prayer book, if I ever said prayers and had a prayer book and a pencil and knew what name to write.”

“Casey Ryan. Don’t you worry, ma’am. We’ll get you outa here in no time.” Casey grinned and craned his neck. Looking lower this time, he saw a pair of feet which did not seem to belong to that voice, though they were undoubtedly feminine. Still, red mud will work miracles of disfigurement, and Casey was an optimist by nature.

“My wife is trying out a new comedy line,” the flat-chested one observed unemotionally. “Trouble is it never gets over out front. If she ever did get it across the footlights I could raise the price of admission and get away with it. How far is it to Rhyolite?”

“Rhyolite? Twenty or twenty-five miles, mebby.” Casey gave him an inquiring look.

“Can we get there in time to paper the town and hire a hall to show in, mister?” Casey saw the mud-caked feet move laboriously toward the rear of the car.

“Yes, ma’am, I guess you can. There ain’t any town, though, and it ain’t got any hall in it, ner anybody to go to a show.”

The woman laughed. “That’s like my prayer book. Well, Jack, you certainly have got a powerful eye, but you’ve been trying to look this outfit out of the mud for an hour, and I haven’t saw it move an inch, so far. Let’s just try something else.”

“A prayer outa your prayer book, maybe,” the flat-chested one retorted, not troubling to move or to turn his head.

Casey blinked and looked again. The woman who appeared from the farther side of the car might have been the creature of his dream, so far as her face, her hair, and her voice went. Her hair was yellow, unmistakably yellow. Her eyes were blue as Casey’s own, and she had nice teeth and showed them in a red-lipped smile. A more sophisticated man would have known that the powder on her nose was freshly applied, and that her reason for remaining so long hidden from his sight while she talked to him was revealed in the moist color on her lips and the fresh bloom on her cheeks.

Casey was not sophisticated. He thought she was a beautiful woman, and asked no questions of her makeup box.

“Mister, you certainly are a godsend!”—she told him again when she faced him. “I’d call you a direct answer to prayer, only I haven’t been praying. I’ve been trying to tell Jack that the shovel is not packed under the banjos, as he thinks it was, but was left back at our last camp where he was trying to dig water out of a wet spot. Jack, dear, perhaps the gentleman has got a shovel in his car. Ain’t it a real gag, mister, us being stuck out here in a dry lake?”

Casey tipped his hat and grinned and tried not to look at her too long. Husbands of beautiful young women are frequently jealous, and Casey knew his place and meant to keep it.

All the way back to his car Casey studied the peculiar features of the meeting. He had been thinking about yellow-haired women—well! But, of course, she was married, and therefore not to be thought of save as a coincidence. Still, Casey rather regretted the existence of Jack, dear, and began to wonder why good-looking women always picked such dried-up little runts for husbands. “Show actors, by the talk,” he mused. “I wonder now if she don’t sing, mebbey?”

He started the car and forged out to them, making the last few rods in low gear and knowing how risky it was to stop. They were rather helpless, he had to admit, and did all the standing around while Casey did all the work. But he shoveled the rear wheels out, waded back to the tiny island of solid ground and gathered an armful of brush, covered himself with mud while he crowded the brush in front of the wheels, tied the tow rope he carried for emergencies like this, waded to the Ford, cranked, and trusted the

rest to luck. The Ford moved slowly ahead until the rope between the two cars tightened, then spun wheels and proceeded to dig herself in where she stood. The other car, shaking with the tremor of its own engine, ruthlessly ground the sagebrush into the mud and stood upon it shaking and roaring and spluttering furiously.

“Nothing like sticking together, mister,” called the lady cheerfully, and he heard the music of her laughter above the churn of their motor.

“Say, ain’t your carburetor all off?” Casey leaned out to call back to the flat-chested one. “You’re smokin’ back there like wet wood.”

The man immediately stopped the motor and looked behind him.

Casey muttered something under his breath when he climbed out. He looked at his own car standing hub deep in red mud, and reached for the solacing plug of chewing tobacco. Then he thought of the lady, and withdrew his hand empty.

“We’re certainly going to stick together, mister,” she repeated her witticism, and Casey grinned foolishly.

“She’ll dry up in a few hours, with this hot sun,” he observed hearteningly. “We’ll have to pile brush in, I guess.” His glance went back to the tiny island and to his double row of tracks. He looked at the man.

“Jack, dear, you might go help the gentleman get some brush,” the lady suggested sweetly.

“This ain’t my act,” Jack dear objected. “I just about broke my spine trying to heave the car outa the mud when we first stuck. Say,

I wish there was a beanery of some kind in walking distance. Honest, I'll be dead of starvation in another hour. What's the chance of a bite, hon?"

Contempt surged through Casey. Deep in his soul he pitied her for being tied to such an insect. Immediately he was glad that she had spirit enough to put the little runt in his place.

"You *would* wait to buy supplies in Rhyolite, remember," she reminded her husband calmly. "I guess you'll have to wait till you get there. I've got one piece of bread saved for junior. You and I go hungry—and cheer up, old dear, you're used to it!"

"I've got grub," Casey volunteered hospitably. "Didn't stop to eat yet. I'll pack the stuff back there to dry ground and boil some coffee and fry some bacon." He looked at the woman and was rewarded by a smile so brilliant that Casey was dazzled.

"You certainly are a godsend," she called after him, as he turned away to his own car. "It just happens that we're out of everything. It's so hard to keep anything on hand when you're traveling in this country, with towns so far apart. You just run short, before you know it."

Casey thought that the very scarcity of towns compelled one to avoid running short of food, but he did not say anything. He waded back to the island with a full load of provisions and cooking utensils, and in three minutes he was squinting against the smoke of a camp fire while he poured water from a canteen into his blackened coffeepot.

"Coffee! Jack, dear, can you believe your nose!" chirped the woman presently behind Casey. "Junior, darling, just smell the

bacon! Isn't he a nice gentleman? Go give him a kiss like a little man."

Casey didn't want any kiss—at least from junior. Junior was six years old and his face was dirty and his eyes were old, old eyes, hot brown like his father's. He had the pinched, hungry look which Casey had seen only among starving Indians, and after he had kissed Casey perfunctorily he snatched the piece of raw bacon which Casey had just sliced off, and tore at it with his teeth like a hungry pup.

Casey affected not to notice, and busied himself with the fire while the woman reprov'd junior half-heartedly in an undertone and laughed and remarked upon the number of hours since they had breakfasted.

Casey tried not to watch them eat, but in spite of himself he thought of a prospector whom he had rescued last summer after a five-day fast. These people tried not to seem unusually hungry, but they ate more than the prospector had eaten, and their eyes followed greedily every mouthful which Casey took, as if they grudged him the food. Wherefore Casey did not take as many mouthfuls as he would have liked.

"This desert air certainly does put an edge on one's appetite," the woman smiled, while she blew across her fourth cup of coffee to cool it, and between breaths bit into a huge bacon sandwich which Casey could not help knowing was her third. "Jack, dear, isn't this coffee delicious!"

"*Mah-ma!* Do we have to p-pay that there g-godsends? C-can you p-pay for more b-bacon for me, mah-ma?" Junior licked his fingers and twitched a fold of his mother's soiled skirt.

“Sure, give him more bacon! All he wants. I’ll fry another skillet full.” Casey spoke hurriedly, getting out the piece which he had packed away in the bag.

“He’s used to these holdup joints where they charge you forty cents for a greasy plate,” the flat-chested man explained, speaking with his mouth full. “Eat all yuh want, junior. This is a barbecue and no collection took up to pay the speaker of the day.”

“We certainly appreciate your kindness, mister,” the woman put in graciously, holding out her cup. “What we’d have done, stuck here in the mud with no provisions and no town within miles, Heaven only knows. Was you kidding us,” she added, with a betrayal of more real anxiety than she intended, “when you said Rhyolite is a dead one? We looked it up on the map, and it was marked like a town. We’re making all the little towns that the road shows mostly miss. We give a fine show, mister. It’s been played on all the best time in the country—we took it abroad before the war and made real good money with it. But we just wanted to see the country, you know—after doing the Cont’nent and all the like of that. So we thought we’d travel independent and make all the small towns—”

“The movie trust is what puts vodeville on the bum,” the man interrupted. “We used to play the best time only. We got a first-class act. One that ought to draw down good money anywhere, and would draw down good money, if the movie trust—”

“And then we like to be independent, and go where we like and get off the railroad for a spell. Freedom is the breath of life to he and I. We’d rather have it kinda rough, now and then, and be free and independent—”

“I’ve g-got a b-bunny, a-and it f-fell in the g-grease box a-and we c-can’t wash it off. And h-he’s asleep now. C-can I g-give my b-bunny some b-bacon, Mister G-godsend?”

The woman laughed, and the man laughed and Casey himself grinned sheepishly. Casey did not want to be called a godsend, and he hated the term mister when applied to himself. All his life he had been plain Casey Ryan and proud of it, and his face was very red when he confessed that there was no more bacon. He had not expected to feed a family when he left camp that morning, but had taken ample rations for himself only.

Junior whined and insisted that he wanted b-bacon for his b-bunny, and the man hushed him querulously and asked Casey what the chances were for getting under way. Casey repacked a lightened bag, emptied the coffee grounds, shouldered his canteen, and waded back to the cars and to the problem of red mud with an unbelievably tenacious quality.

The man followed and asked him if he happened to have any smoking tobacco, and afterward begged a cigarette paper, and then a match. “The dog-gone helpless, starved bunch!” Casey muttered while he dug out the wheels of his Ford, and knew that his own dream must wait upon the need of these three human beings whom he had never seen until an hour ago, of whose existence he had been in ignorance and who would probably contribute nothing whatever to his own welfare or happiness, however much he might contribute to theirs.

I do not say that Casey soliloquized in this manner while he was sweating there in the mud under hot midday. He did think that now he would no doubt miss the night train to Los Angeles, and that he

would not, after all, be purchasing glad raiment and a luxurious car on the morrow. He regretted that, but he did not see how he could help it. He was Casey Ryan, and his heart was soft to suffering, even though a little of the spell cast by the woman's blue eyes and her golden hair had dimmed for him.

He still thought her a beautiful woman who was terribly mismated, but he felt vaguely that women with beautiful golden hair should not drink their coffee aloud, nor calmly turn up the bottom of their skirts that they might use the under side of the hem for a napkin after eating bacon. I do not like to mention this—Casey did not like to think of it, either. It was with reluctance that he reflected upon the different standards imposed by sex. A man, for instance, might wipe his fingers on his pants and look his world straight in the eye. But, dog-gone it, when a lady's a lady, she ought to *be* a lady.

Later Casey forgot for a time the incident of the luncheon on Red Lake. With infinite labor and much patience he finally extricated himself and the show people, with no assistance from them, save encouragement. He towed them to dry land, untied and put away his rope and then discovered that he had not the heart to drive on at his usual hurtling pace and leave them to follow. There was an ominous stutter in their motor, for one thing, and Casey knew of a stiffish hill a few miles this side of Rhyolite.

It was full sundown when they reached the place, which was not a town but a camp beside a spring, usually deserted. Three years before, a mine had built the camp for the accommodation of the truck drivers who hauled ore to Lund and were sometimes unable to make the trip in one day. Casey, having adapted his speed to that of the decrepit car of the show people, was thankful that they

arrived at all. He still had a little flour and coffee and salt, and he hoped that there was enough grease left on the bacon paper to grease the skillet so that bannocks would not stick to the pan. He also hoped that his flour would hold out under the onslaught of their appetites.

But Casey was lucky. A half dozen cowboys were camped there with a pack outfit, meaning to ride the cañons next day for cattle. They were cooking supper, and they had “beefed a critter” that had broken a leg that afternoon running among rocks. Casey shifted his responsibility and watched, in complete content, while the show people gorged on broiled yearling steaks. I dislike to use the word gorge, where a lady’s appetite is involved, but that is the word which Casey thought of first.

Later, the show people very amiably consented to entertain their hosts. It was then that Casey was once more blinded by the brilliance of the lady, and forgot certain little blemishes that had seemed to him quite pronounced. The cowboys obligingly built a bonfire before the tent, into which the couple retired to set their stage and tune their instruments. Casey lay back on a cowboy’s rolled bed with his knees crossed, his hands clasped behind his thinning hair, and smoked and watched the first pale stars come out while he listened to the pleasant twang of banjos in the tuning.

It was great. The sale of his silver claim to the men from Tonopah, the check safely pinned in his pocket, the future which he had planned for himself swam hazily through his mind. He was fed to repletion, he was rich, he had been kind to those in need. He was a man to be envied, and he told himself so.

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