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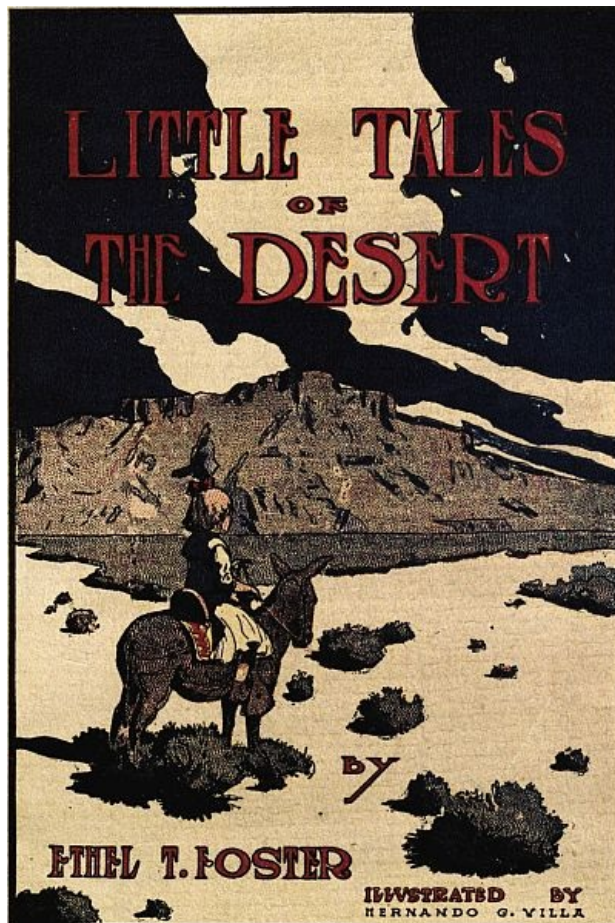
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LITTLE TALES OF THE DESERT

By

ETHEL TWYXCROSS FOSTER, L. L. B.

Illustrations by
HERNANDO G. VILLA

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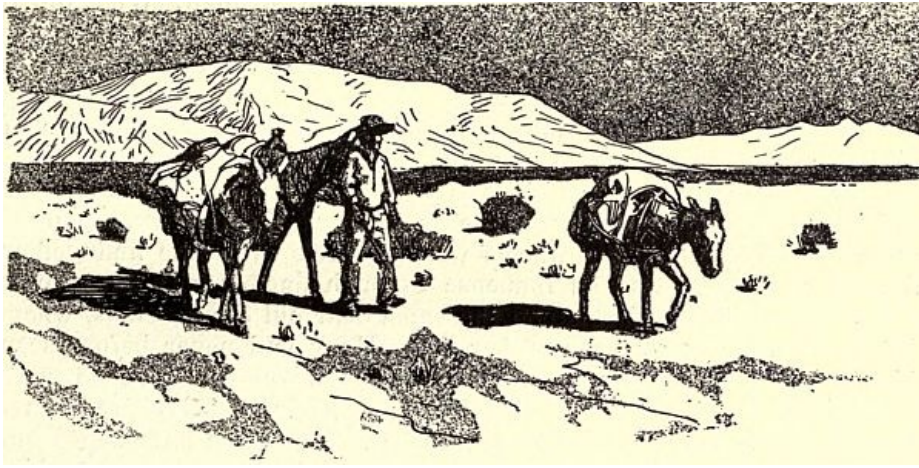
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Christmas on the Desert



CHRISTMAS ON THE DESERT

MARY was worried. To-morrow would be Christmas. Christmas! a day always spent close to New York City, that place where Santa Claus obtained all the contents of his wonderful pack. Here she was, out in the heart of the great Arizona Desert. Her little head was sorely puzzled over many things. Around her were sand, rocks and mountains; no snow, no ice, save on the tops of the distant peaks. How was Santa to draw his gift-laden sleigh over barren stretches of sage brush and sand? Besides, he surely would be far too warm, with his heavy fur coat and cap, to say nothing of the poor reindeer who could scarcely live in such a country.

Mary and her mother had joined her father at his mine, where they were going to spend the winter, sleeping in a tent, eating in a tent, but spending the remainder of the time out of doors, under the clear, blue sky and breathing the sweet, pure air.

Mary enjoyed all these things and no troubled thought crossed her mind until the approach of Christmas. She sought counsel with her mother, but Mother merely looked wise and said "wait." Mothers, somehow, seem to know all about these things and Mary had great confidence in hers, and so she ceased to worry, but still she wondered.

Christmas Eve at last arrived and Mary with many misgivings retired early, as children often do in order to hasten the coming of the day. She slept well, but awoke just as the sun came peeping up from behind the distant mountains.

She sat up on her cot very suddenly and rubbed her eyes. What was that rapidly moving object coming over the brow of the nearest hill? She hurried into her clothes and went out. As the speck came nearer it began to take definite form. But how strange! What did it all mean? Mary stood and stared with wide open eyes. Quickly it came nearer and nearer and presently rolled over the nearest rise and swung up in front of the camp.

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Mary had seen many interesting sights during her short life of six years, but never one so strange.

First came twelve little burros with harnesses nearly hidden by holly berries, while behind was the queerest chariot that ever popped out of a fairy tale. The wheels were covered with blue and yellow flowers and above was an immense Spanish dagger with the center removed, and in its place stood the same dear old Santa Claus, whom Mary had seen every year of her life. Mary had never before seen him in his desert costume. Instead of his warm fur coat, he wore a kakhi coat and trousers, with high top boots, a bright red scarf around his neck and a wide sombrero hat. Below the hat peeped out the same kindly, bright eyes above the rosy cheeks and snowy white beard. Beside him, instead of the usual evergreen tree, a large, queer, crooked limbed joshua tree, was standing. It was literally laden with presents, and all was lighted up, not with candles or wax tapers, but with the crimson blossoms of the Spanish dagger. On every dagger point was hung a gift. There were grown up presents for father and mother and the cook and the miners; and there was a real doll with blue eyes and teeth, that said "Papa," and "Mama," and cried exactly like the dolls found in far away New York. There was a tea set and a little kakhi suit. There was a cute little set of furniture made from cactus burrs, to say nothing of the delicious cactus candy, and other sweetmeats which must have come from a far away town.

Santa descended with a bow and a smile to all, distributed the gifts, joined them for a moment at breakfast, for the dear old man works very hard and gets hungry, and then with a cheery, "Merry Christmas to all," he was off again, leaving behind one of the little burros named Bepo, for Mary's own use.

As he sped away over the sand toward the next camp, Mary gave a sigh and turned to her mother with a happy laugh, saying, "I guess Santa looks after the little girls and boys everywhere, doesn't he, Mamma?"

THE little clock struck twelve, all were sleeping soundly, the tent flap was rolled away and a streak of moonlight stretched half across the floor.

Mary and her mother lay on a bunk and beyond the partition one could hear the even breathing of father and cousin Jack. All else was still save the occasional cry of a night hawk or the far distant call of a coyote.

Slowly, cautiously, stealthily into this silence crept a tiny object. Its sharp, black eyes flashed fire in the moonlight and in its small mouth it carefully carried a cactus burr.

"Pst! Mary, did you hear something?" It was cousin Jack's hoarse whisper that broke the silence and awakened Mary from a beautiful dream and her eyes popped open wide. She snuggled closer to Mother and stared into the moonlight. All she could hear was a funny, little scratching sound, unlike any she had ever heard around camp, and she knew not what it meant. None of her little animal friends made a noise like that.

Jack was out of bed, had lighted a candle and in his pajamas, was searching under bunks, tables and chairs for the thing that had caused the noise. Mary sat up in bed, in time to hear a swift, rustling sound and see a small object dart out of the tent door. Jack knew it would do no good to search outside so tumbled back into bed and once more all was still.



Next morning at breakfast all were wondering who the strange visitor could have been, but soon the incident was forgotten. Toward noon, Mary went to a vacant bunk where she kept her clothes, and picked up her new doll. She removed its dress and looked about for a little, red, wool gown, of which she was very fond, for the day was chilly and it looked like rain. But the gown was gone, high and low she looked, but find it she could not. At last, tired out with searching, she fell asleep, and the pretty lost gown remained a mystery.

During the next few days strange things happened. On the day following one of Dolly's stockings was gone, on the next, its mate; on the next a pretty little velvet bonnet, and so on for a week. The strangest part of it was that something or somebody was bringing in little sticks of wood and cactus burrs and piling them up among the doll clothes.

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At the end of the week, Jack decided to solve the mystery. He said he was going to sit up all night and see what kind of a thing was coming into the tent so regularly. He didn't do exactly what he intended to do, for by ten o'clock his eyelids grew too heavy and he was fast asleep in the vacant bunk which he had chosen for a hiding place.

Patter, patter, patter, something was coming. Jack awoke with a start of expectation. There was no moon tonight, but he had left a candle burning in a distant corner. It was all he could do to keep back a chuckle when he saw a big gray rat dart across the floor with a good sized twig in its mouth. Jack kept perfectly still and the little fellow, not even seeing him, continued its way across the floor to the bunk on which sat Jack beside the doll clothes. It clawed its way up the side of the bunk, dropped the twig, then selected a soft, woolly skirt. Then it turned and scampered away through the door and out into the sagebrush.

Jack gave a hearty laugh and at once awakened the whole family and told them his story.

"Of course," said Father, "it was a trade rat. Why didn't we think of that before? The hills are full of tiny holes where they burrow down and build their nests."

"But what about the twig?" asked Jack.

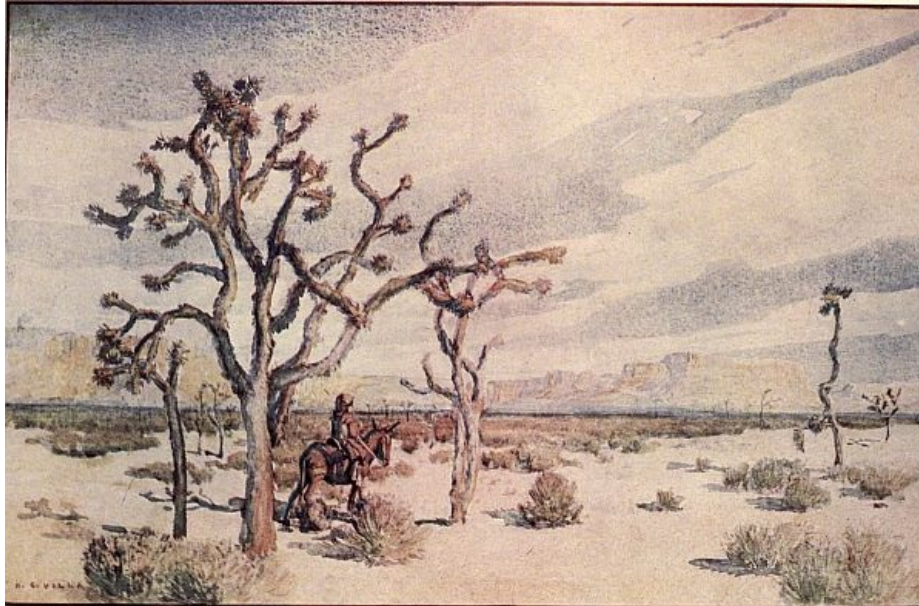
"They always pay for what they take," was the unexpected reply, "they are great fellows to steal both food and clothing, but they never take anything without replacing it with a cactus burr, a twig, a chip of wood, or something of the sort. They seem to think it wrong not to leave something in place of what they take."

"But what did they do with all my dolly's clothes?" asked Mary, "surely they can't wear them."

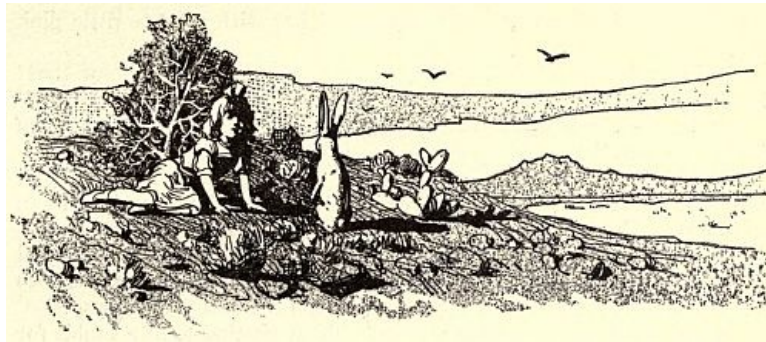
"Indeed no, my dear little girl," said Father, "but probably if you could find their nest, you would see them busy at work lining it with the soft, downy cloth in preparation for a family of little ones."

Mary talked and wondered about all these happenings, and you can imagine her delight when big Joe came running up to camp one day and told her he had found her rat's nest. The men had been digging on a little hill preparing to build the foundation of an extra tent. The hill was covered with rat holes and gopher holes, and Joe lifted up a shovel full of adobe and underneath

was a little cave all carefully lined with warm clothing. On the soft bed lay mother rat and six tiny little fellows with eyes just opened. They were peering around with a frightened look and giving shrill little squeaks of dismay.



Joshua Trees (Mary and Bepo)



[9]

A CHAT WITH MRS. COTTONTAIL

ONE bright Sunday morning Mary wandered away from camp alone. The fact was she did not know what to do. At home she always attended church with Father and Mother, but here the nearest church was eighty miles away, a bit too far for a morning ride, you see. Father did not work Sunday, and as it was about the only time he had to chat with Mother, Mary was for the moment forgotten.

She followed along a little trail leading over a small hill east of camp. Upon arriving at the top she noticed a clump of trees beyond, and they looked so cool and shady that she trotted down the trail and sat beneath them.

Now this was a dangerous thing to do, for she could no longer see home, and there were many trails leading in all directions. A little girl of six years could hardly be expected to remember the way back.

She was soon rested and decided to start for home. She was getting hungry, too. A tiny hill rose from the clump of trees in every direction, which one ought she to choose? She was not a child to be daunted by a thing like this, so boldly started up the path she thought led home. She climbed to the top, but no camp was in sight, no tents, no horses, nothing to indicate the surroundings of those dear people that she did want dreadfully to see, O! so quickly.

"Oh me, oh my, I guess I'm lost!" she cried with a little break in her voice. "I hope there are no bears in these hills. Oh, why did I run away, and where is my mamma?"

She ran back down the hill, throwing herself on the ground under the trees while the great big tears chased down her rosy cheeks. "Can I help you, little girl?" said a tiny voice near by, "you are getting your pretty dress soiled and your hair will be full of sand."

"Oh, I didn't know rabbits could talk," and Mary's eyes grew big and round with wonder. There before her stood a little cottontail perched upon its haunches and blinking at her with its cute little pink eyes.

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"Yes, we desert rabbits could always talk, didn't you know that? But, where is your mamma and what are you doing out here alone?"

"I guess I'm lost," answered Mary, "but you live here, can't you find my home?"

"No, dear little girl, I can't, and I will tell you why. Mr. Man with many brothers and sisters lives in your home. Mr. Man has a gun and he uses that gun to kill poor little rabbits like me. Don't you remember eating some for dinner yesterday? Well, on that day several of our dear little playfellows were killed. Now you see I don't care to be eaten, so must not go near your home, even to show you the way."

Mary gave a little shudder, for she did remember eating rabbit for dinner the day before and that she liked it, too; but she made a resolve never to do so again.

"But I'll not desert you for all that," continued the strange friend. "My home is close by and as you are but a wee bit of a girl and have no gun, I'll take you there."

Mary was delighted. To visit a real rabbit village and to be taken there by Mrs. Rabbit, herself, would be a strange adventure, indeed.

Mrs. Rabbit led the way down a narrow path worn by the little feet of her numerous family. Mary trotted along behind when suddenly the rabbit stood up, gave a jump and darted away into the bushes.

Mary, startled, looked up in surprise. There stood cousin Jack gazing down at her with an amused twinkle in his eyes; why! she, herself, was lying, her head pillowed on her chubby arms, directly under the shady tree where she had thrown herself in despair but a few moments before.

"Well, little girl, what have you been dreaming about?" he asked. "Mother is sure you are lost or eaten up by some of your wild friends."

At this, Mary stood up and looked around indignantly. "Did I really dream about all those dreadful things Mrs. Cottontail told me?" she said.



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RABBITS AND CACTUS BURRS

MARY and Bepo, the burro, soon became fast friends. Few burros lead as happy a life as being the constant playmate of a merry child. Bepo seemed to appreciate this fact and loved Mary accordingly. Many a prospecting trip did they take on their own account over the network of trails leading from camp to the numerous shafts and tunnels of the mine.

You city children and even you country boys and girls would never dream of all the delightful and interesting things they found. I suppose you think of the desert as being a flat stretch of sand with nothing on it, like the maps of the desert of Sahara, in Africa? I know I used to. But indeed it is not so. Many strange forms of life exist, both plant and animal, as we shall soon learn.

This particular morning as they started out, Mary noticed that the ground was covered with cactus burrs. Did you ever see a cactus burr? They are similar to those you find in the country, but larger, with pointed daggers sticking out in all directions, and they grow on a crooked, prickly stalk or spine in the most comical way imaginable. As they ambled along they discovered more and yet more of them. Mary, being an inquisitive child, jumped down from Bepo's back for a closer inspection of the strange things. Then she discovered a queer thing. She had seen lots of burrs before but these were different. All the sharp daggers had been removed, the burrs had been split open and the soft centers taken out.

Mary looked all around, who could have done it? No man could have opened all those burrs, it would have taken him weeks. He would have pricked his fingers many times and often besides.

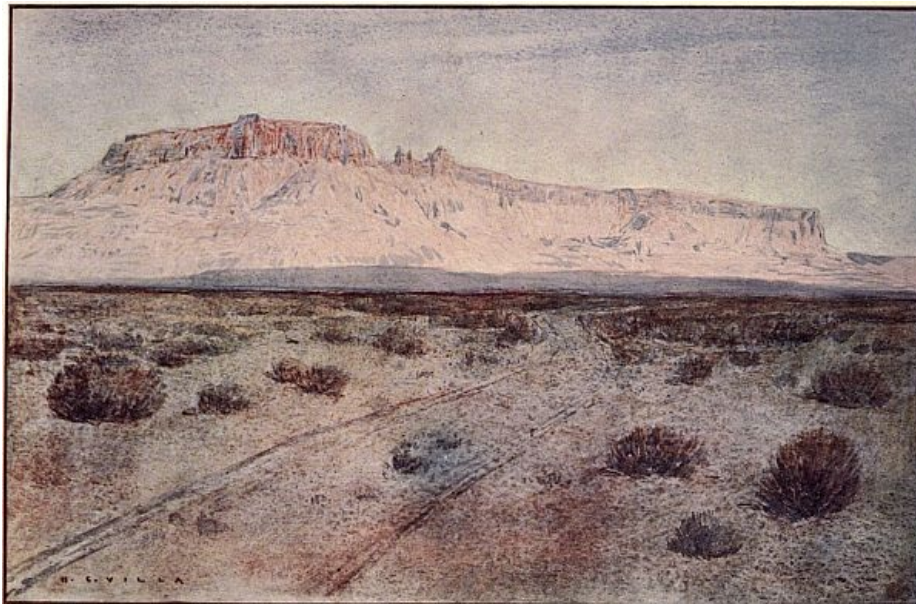
Then she heard a faint rustling in the bushes near by. Softly she tiptoed behind a clump of sagebrush and peeked over. There was a little rabbit nibbling away at a cactus burr. He handled it very carefully to guard against pricks and very daintily nibbled off, one by one, the tiny daggers. When all were gone he split open the burr, sucked out the juice, then nibbled up the soft center. So you see, even on this sandy desert, Nature cares for all her children.

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Mary was so pleased at the sight that she clapped her little hands in glee and cried, "You dear, cute little thing!" But Mr. Rabbit was not used to little girls. He looked up suddenly with fright in his tiny pink eyes, then sprang away into the bushes.

Mary led Bepo around to a rock and clambered onto his back. As they slowly stubbed along over the rough trail they surprised many a family of rabbits and not a few were nibbling away at the prickly cactus burrs.

You can ride for miles over the desert without finding water, no lakes, no rivers, no little stream even; and if it were not for the sweet juices in the center of these burrs many small animals would die of thirst.



Twilight on the Desert



[13]

THE DANGEROUS PET

MARY, with her mother, was taking a short stroll just before sundown. As they were about to return they espied the largest and strangest lizard they ever saw. It was nearly two feet long, with a perfectly round body, a broad, flat head, short legs and a short, blunt tail. It was a chunky little animal, all covered with a rough skin like an alligator and dotted with square warts. It seemed very tame and followed Mary into the tent where she made a warm nest for it in the corner near her bunk. It was very fond of being petted and would lie and rub its head against Mary's hand. When Father returned at night he was much pleased with the strange pet and encouraged Mary to keep it, thinking, of course, that it was some strange overgrown lizard. The question was, what should they feed it? First they tried grubs and worms which were not touched; then bread, meat, insects and all sorts of things, but nothing would he taste. At last someone thought of eggs and that was apparently just what the little fellow wanted, and that is what he lived on during the month Mary had him for her pet.

At the end of that month big Ben, the foreman, came into Mary's tent to repair the floor. The first Mary knew that anything was wrong was when he gave a scream, calling to her to keep away from the tent. Her father, nearby, ran to see what was the trouble; Ben pointed to the big lizard and cried, "A gila monster, let us kill him quickly!" Mary and her parents looked at him in surprise. They had never heard of such an animal. Ben, however, had spent years on the desert and knew well its dangers. But he had no gun and all he could do was to take a stick and push the thing out of doors. Then a queer thing happened. When the hot sun shone down on the gila monster (pronounced heela) it was no longer tame and gentle, but would snap at anyone who came near and acted ugly, continuing to hiss with his mouth wide open, on the lookout for the first sign of an enemy.

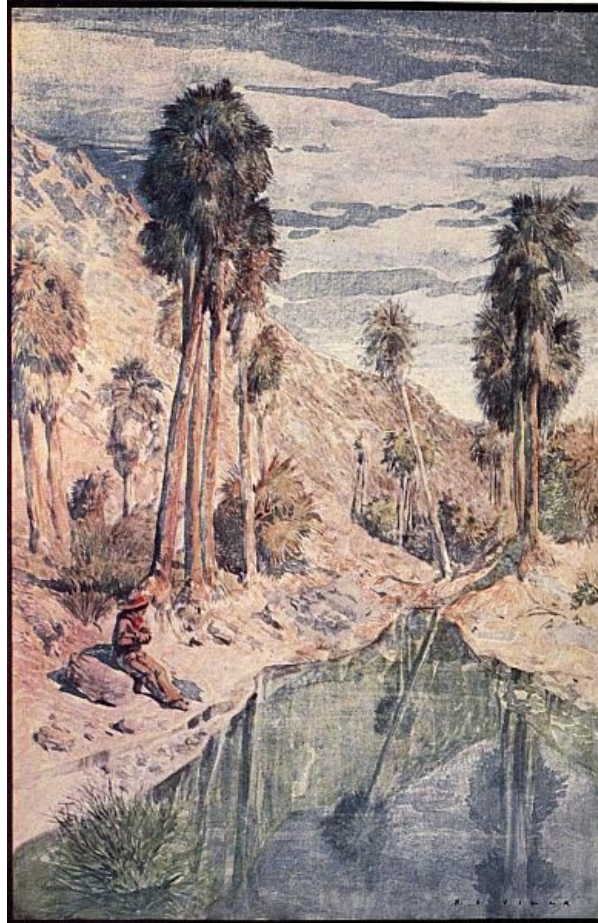
[14]

A squirrel came out of the brush and ran a bit too near, when the big lizard fastened its fangs in the poor little animal and turned over with it in its mouth. The poison is in its lower jaw and

when he turns over it flows out. The squirrel died in a very few moments from the effects of the poison in spite of the fact that Ben had meantime shot the gila monster through the head.

Mary's parents were horrified when they realized what a dangerous pet their little girl had been playing with for so many weeks. They determined to seek Ben's advice hereafter before housing any more strange animals.

But Mary was not in great danger for generally the little reptiles are tame indoors, but out of doors in the sunshine they become cross and ugly and their bite is more dangerous than that of a rattlesnake.



Palm Springs

A VISIT TO PALM SPRINGS

[15]

WOTHER was unused to the desert, so Father, having arranged his business so he could leave it with Big Ben, the foreman, decided to take a vacation and all were going over to Palm Springs for a few days.

Now, Palm Springs is in California near the great Mountain of San Jacinto and it took a day and a half to get there. It was great fun for Mary and Jack to get into a sleeping car and go speeding along over the desert again. They recognized many of their old friends on the way, most of whom they knew nothing about the last time they rode on a train. Then it grew dark and they could no longer see out of the window.

The next morning after breakfast the conductor opened the door and called out, "Palm Springs."

They hurriedly gathered together their bags and suitcases and left the train.

My! but wasn't it cold, and didn't the wind blow? Folks could hardly stand straight and the wind was blowing right off the snow-capped mountains that were all around the place, making it seem colder still. Mary was



hurried into the stage and before they had gone a mile their faces were covered with sand blowing off the desert and you could never have told that their clothes had ever been clean.

Palm Springs itself was five miles from the station, but suddenly the wind stopped blowing and it was warm as summer, then pretty soon they heard dogs barking and rode right through an Indian village.

Some of the squaws were making baskets but most of them were out in the field working just like men. In fact I never saw them, though, especially the little papooses being carried in a little box fastened to the mother's back.



Just beyond was Palm Springs settlement itself, with lots of tents, several houses, a store and a hotel. They stopped at the hotel, and after dinner looked around the funny little store where they sold a little of everything while a phonograph ground out wheezy music. They visited the funny little cottages with their roofs and sides all covered with big palm leaves instead of boards. Then they went up to the hot springs.

There was a stream of water shooting up in the air part of the time, but generally just bubbling up a little higher than the pond itself, which was about six feet wide and ten feet long. It didn't look deep, but the man at the springs told them the center shaft was sometimes as big as a well and no one knew how deep. Father had been there before and he wanted to take Mary into the spring, so with Jack they hired bathing suits and went down. It was very funny. They thought, of course, it was going to be deep, but the bottom was hard sand, and the water just covered their ankles. Father took Mary in first, but the water did not become deeper, but all at once the sand gave way. Father said it was quick sand which somewhat frightened her, but he didn't seem scared so she tried not to be. They went down and down into the sand which seemed to tighten around them, when all at once, when Mary was up to her shoulders, the spring gave a gurgle and tossed them out into shallow water. Mary was frightened, but the rest laughed at her, especially Jack, who was fourteen and thought he was almost a man. He said he could walk around in it all right—the old water could not toss him up like that. It was just bubbling over a little then, so he marched boldly in. But when he felt the warm watery sand hugging him tighter and tighter and sucking him down, he thought surely he was lost and wished he had not bragged. But just then the spring gurgled louder and a high stream shot up and in it was Cousin Jack, who landed safe and sound beside them. I can tell you he was a happy boy.

They soon became accustomed to the idea and spent an hour of fun wading in and being gently but firmly tossed out. Then they went back to Dr. Murray's Hotel where Mother met them at the door. After a supper of fresh eggs, nice biscuits, strawberries and cream, they retired to their tent and when all were in bed Father rolled up the sides so they could look out at the stars and breathe the fresh, warm air softly blown to them by the gentle mountain breezes.



The Road Runner



[17]

THE ROAD-RUNNER

OF all Mary's pets she liked her road-runners best. Did you ever see a road-runner? It makes its home on the desert where you would find it impossible to get food, yet this little bird finds plenty and leads a happy existence. He looks much like a pheasant with broad wings, a long, broad tail and a crest that stands up very stiff and straight. The tail is very flexible, and many people who have lived on the desert a long time, say they can almost tell what the road-runner's thoughts are by the way he holds his tail. If you can make friends with the little bird and get near enough to it you can see the beautiful colors in its feathery coat. The olive green wings are edged with white, and the crest is of dark, deep blue. The bird is about twenty inches long, including the tail.

A pair had built a nest in a clump of cactus a short distance from camp. The first time Mary espied them was the day after her arrival. One came up over a low ridge and stood looking at Mary with curiosity expressed in its long, flexible tail. This, of course, aroused Mary's interest and she hastened away to make friends. But it was not to be. Very quickly the bird retreated to its cactus patch. But it came again the next day and the next.

At first Mary was afraid of frightening it away, but one day it came as she was eating a thick slice of bread and butter and she tossed it some crumbs. As before, he scampered away to a safe distance, but there he stopped. Mary stepped back and waited and pretty soon the little fellow returned and rapidly ate up all the crumbs. He then gave a little toss of his tail as if to say "thank you," and went home.

After this Mary and the little road-runner soon became fast friends, and later Mary taught him that Cousin Jack was his friend, too. He soon learned that the big horn that the cook blew three times a day meant something to eat; and was always on hand to get his share. He would always save a goodly part of this share and carry it home to his mate.

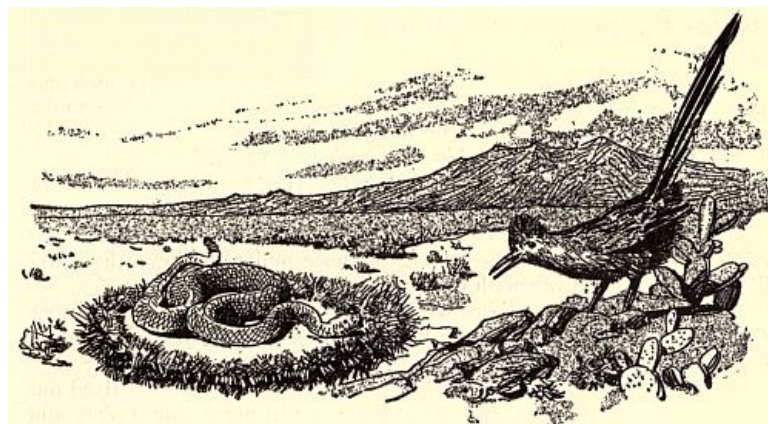
Mary and Jack each had a burro and often they would take short rides to the nearby camps, for Jack was a steady, reliable boy and Mary's father knew he would take care to see that no harm

The trail led by the road-runner's nest and whenever he saw the little girl and the big boy coming along on their burros he would dart out into the road and rush ahead at full speed. He could always keep ahead, too. Try as they might Mary and Jack were unable to get ahead of him. When he grew weary of the sport he would turn suddenly and hurry into the brush until they had passed.

In some ways, though, he was a nuisance. Mary's uncle had sent them a box containing a dozen chickens so that they could have some fresh eggs as a change from the cold storage eggs commonly found in mining camps. Now, the little road-runner would often try to slip into the chicken yard when no one was looking. He would wait indifferently, promenading up and down in a dignified manner until one of the hens cackled. He knew this meant a fresh egg and he would deliberately march up, peck a hole in the new laid egg and as deliberately swallow the contents.



Colorado Desert (Ocotilla in foreground)



A STRANGE CAPTURE

ONE warm day in February a great lazy rattlesnake, over three feet long, glided out from under a broad, flat rock. It slowly wound its way through sagebrush and cactus until it found an open space where the hot rays of the noonday sun fell uninterrupted.

Here it stretched itself out at full length, and after enjoying the warmth of the sunshine for a little while, gradually grew drowsy and at last fell asleep.

Exactly one hour later, a faint rustling sound was heard. From behind the same rock peeped out an excited looking little creature. It was no other than our little friend the road-runner. But why so agitated and disturbed? Its little tail was bobbing up and down, and its beautiful bluish-black crest was raised as high as possible. He had spied his lifelong enemy, the rattlesnake.

Suddenly, as quickly as he came, he disappeared from sight. He was soon back, carrying in his beak a cactus burr, which he placed on the ground near the sleeping snake. Back and forth he went, each time returning with a prickly burr. Before long he had a hedge entirely surrounding poor, unsuspecting Mr. Snake. Then one more burr was brought and quietly dropped on the snake's head.

Now, the skin of a snake is very sensitive and he immediately woke up. Of course his first motion rubbed the delicate skin against the prickly burr. He gave a vicious rattle and started to move away from the troublesome thing. He struck at one side of the hedge, then another. He grew more and more angry. He would try to poke his nose between the burrs, but on being pricked by the sharp points, he would draw back and try in another place. At last, overcome with anger and mortification, he drove his poisonous fangs into his own body and soon died.

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Mr. Road-runner, meanwhile, had retreated to a safe distance and was much interested in all that was happening. When sure the snake was dead, he cautiously darted up to the hedge and gave the dead snake a series of sharp pecks with his long beak as an additional safeguard. Then he settled down and ate a portion, carrying the best part away to his nest to share with his mate.

Now, if that snake had kept his temper and not become excited, he might have realized that by poking his nose under the burrs he could lift them and get away with only a few scratches.

However, there are times when even boys and girls let their anger get the best of them, so why should we expect more wisdom in a poor, foolish snake!

Sometimes the snake doesn't kill itself, but only becomes tired out and lies down motionless, when the little road-runner comes over and pecks him to death. There are only a few animals, birds or insects who can kill a rattlesnake, and the road-runner does this about as neatly as any.



A Desert May Party

[21]



A DESERT MAY PARTY

WHY, Mamma, the very idea! Who ever heard of a desert May party?" I hear some tiny girl exclaim, "A desert is all sand, if there were flowers there it would not be desert at all."

Ah, yes, my dear, I used to think so, too, but to Mary it was no surprise. She had spent the winter on the desert, had seen the heavy rains, and afterwards had watched how rapidly the sturdy little green shoots would push their way up through the hard unsympathetic soil. Generally once a year the desert puts on its party dress and is dotted with a gorgeous mass of blossoms.

The rains come at intervals in the winter and early spring and the heavier and more frequent they are, the greater will be the flower growth. The March and April rains this year had been heavy. There had been days when Cousin Jack had come in with his raincoat dripping and declared that he knew Mt. Kenyon would be washed away. Now and then a cloudburst would strike terror to Mary's tender heart. She had gone out when the weather cleared and watched the warm earth rise up and break, while the little green things peeped through and took their first look at the sun. The ground was always warm and it was amazing to see how rapidly things would grow if you but gave them water.

The thing that now troubled Mary was the fact that she had no one to ask to share her party. Of course there was Jack, but Jack was only a boy and a May party, above all else, means girls.

It is strange what unexpected things happen at times, even in lonesome mining camps. The thought had barely entered her little curly head when she looked away over toward the mountains and saw a big, lumbering wagon, drawn by four strong horses, come creeping down the road. Long before it reached camp she could see that there were several people on it and then she saw the children.

[22]

There were four of them, three little blue eyed girls with flaxen hair and a slightly older brother with the same light hair but who looked at the world through a pair of big, laughing brown eyes. They were staying twenty miles up the valley with their parents who had charge of a small cattle ranch, and Mother and children were having a holiday going to town with Father. They stopped to water the horses and you may be sure that it did not take long for the children to become acquainted. Not many little folks live on the desert and playmates are almost unknown. As it turned out, Father and Mother went on to town alone and left the children to enjoy one another until their return on the following day.

Mary's mother was always planning surprises, so when she appeared with two large lunch baskets heaped with goodies, Mary realized that this would be a May day party unlike any she had ever before seen. Six burros were kept ever ready in the corral and these were caught and saddled for the children. Mother rode her Indian pony, a Christmas gift from Father. As they passed the mill and wound up the trail by the main shaft of the mine, the men were changing shift and as the cage swung up to the surface the miners called a cheery good-bye, for they were very fond of Mary.

They ascended the next rise and what they saw was fairyland. They were at the entrance of a canyon. A tiny stream of water ran in the center and beside it wound a narrow trail. Foothills rolled up on either side and the steep walls were a mass of flowers. Wild heliotrope, thistle, poppies, white, pink and yellow gillias, long-leaved wild tobacco, with its rich yellow blossoms, all were massed together and far more beautifully arranged than the stiff gardens in Central Park.

"Aunt Louise," called Jack to Mamma, who was riding behind with the little girls, "isn't that a campfire up on the next hill?"

"No, Jack," she replied, "not a fire, only a smoke tree. That is why it received its name. The branches are grayish with tiny sage-green leaves and at a distance it is often mistaken for a fire as it is all so delicate and filmy."

By this time Jack had ridden ahead for a closer inspection of the bush and startled us all by a little cry of pain.

"Be careful, Jack, it is also called the porcupine tree by the miners," called Mother, "the tiny leaves are nothing more than very sharp and prickly spines."

"Why is it that so many desert plants have stickers and thorns?" asked Tom, the rancher's son.

"Why, can't you see for yourself, Tom?" called back Jack, "if they weren't sharp and prickly all these little desert animals would tear them up when they were young and tender and they would never grow to be full sized."

"Yes," said Mother, "it is simply the way that nature protects her young so that it will not be destroyed in infancy. There are still other protections necessary on the desert for the hot sun would otherwise kill many plants. A large number are covered with a soft down which is really a mass of tiny air cells that keep the stems and leaves cool and protect them from the hot sun's rays."

"And see, there is a creosote bush, its rich green leaves are covered with a kind of varnish which keeps them cool the same as the hairs would do. See how the recent rains have brought out a mass of blossoms at the tip of every branch, what a delicate flower, held in a pale green cup. And there is another smoke tree, nearer the water and so it has blossomed earlier, every point has a gorgeous purple flower."

"See the funny bunch of sticks over here, Mamma," called Mary, "they look like a lot of candles sticking up."

"And that is just what they are called, my dear, ocatilla, or candle cactus. They have no leaves for the greater part of the year, but after the rains they leave out and are soon covered with those beautiful scarlet bells."

"Yes," answered Mary, "they look like some beautiful winged bird just about to fly away. And how tall the candles are, lots higher than our tents back in camp."

It would take too long to tell you about all the desert beauties that the children saw, they all agreed that nothing as beautiful was ever seen "back East" where it rains half the time.

At noon they sat down under a clump of mesquite and ate the splendid luncheon. The pure fresh air had made them ravenously hungry. The mesquite was a low, stocky tree which did not grow high but spread out in every direction, branches thick with foliage.

"Why don't the old tree grow up higher and not bother about having so many side branches?" asked Jack.

Then Mother told him. "Why, can't you see?" she asked. "The sun is so hot that it kills the tiny buds on the end of the branch; but the tree is determined to grow, just the same, so it sends out side buds, where the sun's rays are not as hot and the short, stubby tree is the result."

"At any rate it makes a fine shade and that is all we need just now," answered Jack.

They rested under the wide spreading branches until the sun shone a bit less fiercely, then they slowly rode homeward through the beautiful blossoms, arriving just at dusk, very hungry, a little tired, but happy in the thought that they had visited one of the strangest and most beautiful corners of the earth.

Transcriber's Notes:

The original text did not contain a table of contents. One was created for this text.

Khaki is spelled kakhi in this text.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LITTLE TALES OF THE DESERT ***

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