

DUST BOWL DERELICTS—WE CRIED
TO GODA Faith Story Out of America's Own Army
of Refugees—By Iris Brown

Our Father in heaven, Give us this day our daily bread. O God, if you are really our heavenly Father, show us Thy face. Give us food, or we starve," I prayed desperately.

We were dust-bowl refugees. The dust came in black blizzards, choking man and beast, smothering our fields, too. We covered our faces with wet sheets to keep our lungs from its killing effects and waited—waited long eternities for the dust to cease pouring from the skies.

And after the blizzard ceased we cried—the children and I—while my husband cursed heaven and earth. It was the first time he had ever done such a thing. But God, we felt, had punished us unjustly and past endurance.

It wasn't just the dust storms. For four years there had been drought. We had struggled through each long, barren year—living on the hope that next year we would have a crop and water—until our credit was all gone, our livestock, all dead, our few household treasures sacrificed. Worst of all, our faith in God was gone. We felt no sense of the protecting wings of a kindly Deity hovering over us, but rather the flaming sword which sent Adam and Eve fleeing from the Garden of Eden.

I had been first attracted to Glenn, my husband, by his warm faith in the tenderness of the Great Shepherd, and by his ability to see the bright side of any situation, no matter how gloomy. I had been the schoolteacher in a one-room rural schoolhouse, way out in the mountains, and Glenn was the driver of the school bus line.

A sudden snowstorm trapped us there for several days with little fuel and no food. Glenn kept the children laughing, kept their courage bright, played endless dramas for them. In one of these dramas he played the part of Ichabod Crane—you know, in the story of Sleepy Hollow. He does look a little like chabod, until you see his deep-glowing brown eyes.

In those long hours of suspense he led the children and me into his own type of prayer, which was a poetic praise of our Lord through study of nature about us.

The world finally got through to us, but we had lived on a high plane of mutual understanding and love of God, and we couldn't bear to be parted. And so we were married that spring and took up a homestead out on the prairie, a dry land ranch, miles away from any town nor neighbors. But the land produced bountifully in those days, and we weren't lonesome. Children came to bless our home, and the Bible was always a part of our lives, so we organized our own little Sunday school.

During the first years of the drouth we kept bravely at it, praying confidently. But on and on stretched the lean years, blasting us into hopelessness.

Those black blizzards blinded Glenn to God. I was no better. I did no cursing, but bitterness kept my thoughts earthbound and I wouldn't pray.

Our lands was buried under tons of shifting sands. A rattle-bang car was all that was left to us, and into that we packed our few blankets and pots and pans.

"Where are we going, daddy?" asked

Lloyd, our oldest boy, now nearing ten years of age.

"Just going," he answered with a flash of his old self. "Going to kill that dragon that drank up all the water." But that was when we started out. All these wearily miles he had tried to make jokes, but he was licked now. Somewhere in Arizona we had taken the advice of another refugee who said, "You ought to cut off from the main trails. Millions of folks like us on this same trek. They have been like grasshoppers on the main road. Folks have seen so many of us that the milk of human kindness is curdled."

So here we were—certainly off the main trail. Miles and miles without a human habitation or a gas station. We didn't have any more money to buy gas, anyway.

"Mom, I'm so hungry my stomach thinks my throat is cut," said Lloyd, trying to make a joke of it. Well I knew he was hungry, for I was, too. Our last meal had been the previous morning, and it was only a little gruel that I made of flour and water and bacon fat, and a dried prune. We were at the end of our "tradables" too.

"Gas all gone," Glenn announced as the car sputtered to a halt under a baking noonday sun.

Without another word he shouldered his gun—he might be able to trade it for some gas if he ever came to any station—and trudged away.

Endless miles of desert stretched on all sides of us, dry, barren, desolate. Scattered shrubs here and there, bristling with thorns. Some dry-looking grasses.

"What a God-forsaken country," I said. "God-forsaken, that's us," I thought, as I listlessly told the children to huddle under the car for a little shade. After a while I heard Lloyd saying something, and asked him, "What are you mumbling to yourself about?"

"Green pastures, and still water. And the Lord is my Shepherd—How does that go, Mummy?"

Stranded, penniless, hungry and thirsty in a parching land! My son did no complaining and tried to pray. I was ashamed into a like effort. The children of Israel had been lost in the wilderness, and the Lord fed them manna, but only because they believed.

It was Lloyd who first noticed the old man approaching. An old Indian on a pinto pony ambling slowly through the heat. Lloyd called out to him, "Hello, Chief!"

It seemed that pleased the old Indian. He said, "How! Little Chief!"

I asked him if he could help us by giving us a little water from the canteen he carried. He answered me, "White man starve in the midst of plenty. White man go thirsty where water is right there."

"Plenty?" I echoed bitterly. "Plenty!"

The most obvious feature of the desert landscape is the cactus plant. Now the old Indian walked over to one of these spiny, sprawling plants that clung so grimly to the earth. Skilfully using his knife, he stripped the spines from the flat pads of the plant and gave one to Lloyd to eat.

"Oh, it's good and juicy," cried the boy. "Here, sister, this will fix you for a drink," he said, and gave the remainder to the fretting three-year-old.

"There is your spring, always with you in the desert." By this speech I could see he was really educated in the white man's ways as well as his own nature-wise ways.

So there was the food for which I had prayed!

Later he told me how those pads can be prepared in many fashions. They contain mineral salts, considerable protein, sugar, and other valuable elements. They are palatable when fried or made into salads, and the fruit may be put up as apple butter or other fruits are. Many types of cactus store water—but here were only the flat prickly pear type. A little water from his canteen and the cactus fruits slaked our thirst. Then the old man showed us more of nature's food stores right at hand. This was pinole, nutritious and tasty as beefsteak. Its ingredients were the seeds of the white sage and sandgrass and saltsage. He took a shallow pan and knocked their heads into this with a stick.

"There is health and strength in these," he instructed me. "You can eat them, ground into a meal and made into gruel, or baked into bread, or just simply stewed. All of the life-giving qualities of the plant are packed in the seeds."

I had prayed, and my prayer had been answered by a kindly old man who opened my eyes to see the blessings that the Lord had put under my hands. Sometimes disasters come upon us in great swirling floods which sweep us from our moorings, but we can only trust in the Almighty, provided that we have done our part to the very limit. If we just sit down and wail we cannot see what blessings He has put under our hands.

So that evening we feasted out there in the desert. Our guide taught us how to make fire from the mesquite brush and used the water in his canteen for our supper of fruit and pinole. And then our kindly good Samaritan rode on into the desert as quietly as he had come, followed by our grateful blessings.

A silver moon poured a flood of enchantment over the desert—it was as if the "Glory of the Lord was upon the land." I remembered now my favorite benediction, "And the Lord make his face to shine on you and give you peace."

I was at peace. I had no worries, no cares. The children and I were singing hymns when a car chugged over the rim of the silvery world. When it came closer to me it proved to be my husband.

He sprang happily out of the car. Good fortune came to him as he plodded hopelessly along.

He had arrived at a little tenthouse beside a deep well. "That sick woman needs us, to care for her, and she can give us all a home for the summer. She and her husband were health seekers, but her husband came out to the desert too late. He was buried last month, and now she is alone. She has insurance, but she needs us, and we need her, too. God surely guided us to come this way," Glenn told me in a rush of happy words.

With tears running down our faces we knelt under the beautiful skies and gave our thanks to the Lord—thanks that we were back in the Paths of Peace where the Good Shepherd leads beside the still waters. From that time on our Lord has prepared a table for us in the presence of our enemies. Our cup runneth over, for goodness, mercy and loving kindness have followed us all the days, and we praise our Lord forevermore.—Your Faith.

"How rare it is to find a soul quiet enough to hear God speak!"—Fenelon.