

**The Good-For-Nothing**

By

Sylvia Snyder & Beth Black

**SAMPLE**

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Snyder & Black

FADE IN:

EXT. FARM — SUNSET

It's summer. Weeds bloom on a plot of land not far from a ramshackle farmhouse.

The MAIN TITLE is followed by this:

WYOMING TERRITORY  
Spring, 1860

We hear the SOUND of a SHOVEL THROWING EARTH.

Sixteen-year-old AMANDA PAYNE huddles with her precocious four-year-old brother, TAD. Dressed in faded homespun, they stand near the weeds, bearing silent witness to the burial. Amanda is a lovely large-boned blind girl. Both children are blond and blue eyed.

SOFT FOCUS. Pinched-faced MOTHER PAYNE, wearing a shapeless black dress, throws the last bit of dirt over her husband's grave.

MOTHER  
(nasal voice)

Willis Payne, I commend your body to the ground that holds five of my children. Damn you for leaving me alone with a no-good blind girl and a four-year-old boy.

She finishes shoveling, straightens up, and turns to Amanda.

MOTHER  
Why are you the one to survive? If my three boys had lived, I wouldn't be giving up my farm and going like a beggar to live with my sister.

Tad clutches Amanda and they weep together.

FADE TO BLACK

FADE IN:

EXT. PLAIN — DAY

Amanda rides beside her mother who is driving a one-horse buckboard packed with their meager belongings. Tad sleeps in the back. Wind ruffles Amanda's blonde braids.

The rattle of a pan hanging from an outside nail joins the sounds of the horse, DAISY'S plodding, the wheels turning on the rocky earth.

MOTHER

Amanda. That pan's thumpin' bothers me. See if you can fix it.

Amanda gropes for the pan and accidentally knocks it off its perch. It clatters to the ground. Her mother reins Daisy to a stop.

MOTHER

Whoa!

The older woman climbs down to retrieve the pan. Then puts it in back and climbs up to resume driving.

MOTHER

Whenever I ask you to do somethin', you never get it right. You've always been a good-for-nothin'--always will be. Sixteen, and a good-for-nothin' blind girl. Lot of help you'll be getting us to my sister's.

Mother snaps the reins as Amanda silently weeps. The wagon moves again, brushing against a tree. A large branch narrowly misses Mother. Tad sits up, rubs his eyes, and puts his arms around Amanda's neck.

TAD

I woke up.

He climbs over the seat back and slides into Amanda's lap. Quickly, he tickles her under her chin. Now she is able to smile.

TAD

How far is it?

AMANDA

About fifty miles to Aunt Hilda's farm.

TAD

When'll we get there?

AMANDA

Four or five days.

Tad snuggles into his sister.

TAD

Why did Pa die?

AMANDA

He got Typhus.

TAD

Will I get Typhus and die?

AMANDA

No, of course not. You're a fine strong boy.

She gives him a squeeze. He looks into her face lovingly.

TAD

Mandy, I love your beautiful big red eyes and beautiful big purple lips.

AMANDA

I've never seen red and purple but if you love them, they must be good. You always make me feel better.

Amanda sighs. Tad twists in her lap and his head comes down on her nose with a hard crack.

TAD

I'm sorry.

He strokes her face.

Amanda rubs her nose and whispers,

AMANDA

It okay, little skunk. I'll survive.

Suddenly, the wagon lurches to a stop at a river's edge.

AMANDA

What is it, Ma?

MOTHER

We've come to a river.

AMANDA

What'll we do?

Amanda juggles Tad to a more comfortable position.

MOTHER

It's not deep. We'll ride straight through it. Giddyap!

Mother slaps the reins but the horse won't budge.

MOTHER

Devils in Hell! I'll have to pull her through.

She swoops down from the wagon and tries to yank Daisy into the water.

MOTHER

Come! Don't get contrary on me now!

Mother strains at the bridle, but the horse won't budge.

MOTHER

I'll show you to come when I say!

She abandons the bridle, finds a heavy stick, goes back and strikes Daisy. Daisy screams and rears. The wagon lurches violently.

MOTHER

Don't you rear up on me!

Mother strikes the horse once more. Again, the horse rears and knocks her into the river. The wagon shakes with such force that Amanda nearly falls off the seat. Mother struggles in the river but can't free herself.

MOTHER

Amanda! That damned horse butted me into the river! I'm stuck in quicksand! There's a coil of rope hangin' on the back of the wagon. For God's sake, find it and throw me a line. Hurry!

AMANDA

Tad, you get off first. Be careful!

Amanda follows Tad down and gropes her way to the back of the wagon. She runs her fingers over the rough wood until she finds the rope. Removing the coil from the nail, she feels her way back towards the horse. Tad whimpers.

Just as Amanda is about to edge into the river, Mother shouts:

MOTHER

Stop! Another step and you'll be in it too. Throw me an end of the rope.

Amanda unwinds the rope and throws an end towards her mother's voice. The rope hits the water with a PLUNK. Mother struggles and tries to reach the rope but cannot.

MOTHER

It's too far to the left. I can't reach it. Try again. More to the right.

Amanda, panting, pulls in the rope and casts again. Again Mother tries to reach the rope but cannot.

MOTHER

It fell too far to the right! Let Tad try.

Amanda frantically hauls in the rope and hands it to Tad.

AMANDA

Here Tad, you try.

Tad throws the rope towards his mother but it falls short. The water now ripples at Mother's neck.

MOTHER

Tad can't do it. Amanda, you try again! And hurry!

Tad surrenders the rope to Amanda.

AMANDA

Keep talking, Ma, so's I can know where you are!

MOTHER

Oh Lord! Hurry! I'm going down!

Hurling it with all her strength, Amanda manages to drop the rope close to her mother.

Mother grabs the end of the rope.

MOTHER

Got it! Now pull--both of you, pull!

The children pull the rope without success.

MOTHER

Damnation! Tie it to the wagon and use the horse.

Amanda feels her way down the horse to the wagon, searching for a place to tie the line.

Mother disappears. Only the rope floats on the surface of the river.

Amanda continues to search the side of the wagon for a spot to anchor the rope even after her mother's voice ceases. The only sound is the sobbing of her brother.

TAD

Ma's gone! Ma's gone!

Amanda throws down the coil and drops to her knees, feeling closer and closer to the water's edge. Tad runs up behind Amanda and catches her skirt to stop her from falling into the quicksand. He continues to sob.

TAD

Ma! Ma!

AMANDA

Ma, can you hear me? Where are you? Help! Help!  
Somebody help us! Oh, God! Somebody help us! Oh,  
God! What are we going to do?

As Amanda screams, her horror turns to shock and then to fear. She begins to shake and hyperventilate.

Tad pulls at her skirt feverishly. His distress breaks through Amanda's hysteria, and the fear in her face is replaced by determination. She picks him up and holds him close. Slowly, she is able to control her shaking.

AMANDA

Stop crying, Tadpole. Ma's gone to be with Pa. But everything's going to be all right. I just...need your help.

TAD

Huh?

She sets him down.

AMANDA

Help me find our way.

TAD

(wiping the last tears)

Uh-huh.

AMANDA

It's five day's travel to Aunt Hilda's farm. With your eyes, and me driving Daisy, we might find help. I've got to make Daisy back away from the river. Stay right here.

Amanda feels her way to the horse and manages to capture the bridle. Pulling and pushing, she says:

AMANDA

Back, Daisy, back! C'mon! Good girl. Nice girl. Back! C'mon, back!

The horse takes a step back. Then two. But the wagon doesn't budge.

AMANDA

Back, Daisy! That's right! Back!

The horse takes another step backwards, then goes down and screams.

TAD

She slipped on a rock!

The horse snorts and whinnies with little shrieks.

AMANDA

She's in pain. Must've broke her leg.

TAD

Ooooooh.

AMANDA

Once when our cow was trying to birth a calf, something went wrong. Pa managed to save the baby but couldn't save the mother. He shot her. I'm going to have to put Daisy out of her pain. I need to find Pa's six shooter.

TAD

I'll get it.

AMANDA

No. I don't want you near it. He always kept it loaded.

Again quavering, Amanda tries to climb into the wagon but falls down. She picks herself up and tries again. This time she makes her way to their belongings and pokes around the furniture and bedding. She finds the gun under some food.

AMANDA

Here it is.

Amanda holds it by the barrel and slides off the wagon.

AMANDA

Out of the way, Tad.

Feeling her way to Daisy, she runs her hand over the animal to find its head. The horse lies in an awkward, half upright position, still attached to the wagon. The head hangs low, not touching the ground. With trembling hands, Amanda puts the end of the revolver against Daisy's head and squeezes the trigger. Nothing happens.

TAD

You've got to pull that thing back.

Amanda runs her fingers over the six shooter. She pulls and pushes each part of the gun with all her strength. Finally, something on top pulls back. This time when she puts the weapon against the horse's head and squeezes, there is a loud explosion.

Startled birds fly skyward from the trees. The following silence lets her know she has succeeded. She picks up her brother and rocks him from side to side until his sobs quiet.

AMANDA

If we follow the river and drink from it, we won't have to carry water with us. And we're bound to find people.

TAD

Why?

AMANDA

Because they need water too. Downstream is toward the flatlands. There's bound to be farms there. Now let's eat and then pack what food we can carry.

First, Amanda hunts for and finds her walking stick fashioned out of a hickory branch. Then she locates and doles out the food. They lunch on cornbread, cheese, apples, and cider.

Note: Sylvia Snyder was Beth's mother and is now deceased. Beth retains full rights to this project.

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