

# FORT BLOCKER

## BOYS

Lewis B. Miller





# FORT BLOCKER BOYS

By

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## CONTENTS

	PAGE
I	
A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT.....	9
II	
THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE.....	26
III	
WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER.....	43
IV	
HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS.....	56
V	
TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK.....	70
VI	
WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME.....	83
VII	
THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES.....	94
VIII	
SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY.....	105
IX	
COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE.....	117

---

---

---

## CONTENTS

---

---

	PAGE
X	
FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING.....	129
XI	
AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP.....	142
XII	
THAT STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS.....	155
XIII	
THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN.....	168
XIV	
A FLASH IN THE PAN.....	181
XV	
SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR.....	192
XVI	
THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP.....	202
XVII	
A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES.....	216
XVIII	
BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS.....	227
XIX	
THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP.....	240

---

---

---

## CONTENTS

---

---

	PAGE
XX	
“IT’S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE”.....	253
XXI	
WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND.....	267
XXII	
RAIDING HARBOLT’S MELON-PATCH.....	281
XXIII	
THE TRANSGRESSOR’S HARD WAY.....	293
XXIV	
SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK.....	307
XXV	
HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY.....	322
XXVI	
UNDER A BURNING CABIN.....	339
XXVII	
WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON.....	352
XXVIII	
AFTER THE RAID IS OVER.....	365



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
“BOTH HE AND MARZEE HAD HOLD OF THE BAIL OF HER BUCKET”.....	50 ✓
“ON CLATTERED AND THUNDERED THE TERRIFIED COWS” .....	124 ✓
“SCARCELY A DOZEN FEET AWAY STOOD THE BELLED COUGAR” .....	201 ✓
“ALL FIVE OF THEM; YOU CAN COUNT THEM FOR YOURSELF” .....	369 ✓





## I

### A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

**B**LOCKER CREEK, timber-fringed and deepset between two bent and broken rows of steep, grass-grown hills, cuts across a dozen or twenty miles of northern Texas. Its head, as well as most of its short, crooked length, lies in a high prairie country; but a scant league to the west starts up that great forest, a day's travel wide and weeks' travel long—the Cross Timbers. The creek's general course is from north to south. For, though it rises almost in sight of Red River, it flows away from that stream and never meets it, but finally spouts its waters into the Gulf of Mexico through the Trinity.

Down the narrow valley of Blocker moved, one morning in the days of the pioneers, a farm-wagon, drawn by a yoke of long-horned oxen, and piled high with straight, slim logs that had recently been the wall of a house. Two persons were riding on top of the load. On the forward end a man with a ragged brown beard sat with his feet hanging down. He was driving, guiding the team by words of command. Farther back perched a boy, gazing around alertly, eagerly. Not large as yet,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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he was just at the age where boyhood makes ready to shoot upward to manhood.

Both the driver and his companion were armed. From the leather scabbard that hung at the man's belt protruded the polished walnut-and-brass handle of a Colt six-shooter. A rifle lay across the boy's lap, its muzzle pointing prudently backward. Also a slender, thin-scraped powder-horn hung on one side of him and a wolf-skin ammunition-bag on the other.

"Whose house is that we're coming to now, pa?"

"That's where they say Parson Eli Witt lives—the Babtis' preacher I heard preach when I was up here before."

"Reckon he'll move to Fort Blocker, too?"

"Guess not. Don't need to move, the parson don't. Only about a half a mile to the fort from here. Two more branches to cross—no, three more, and then we'll be there. We could see the fort now if the woods was chopped out of the way."

"As close as that? Then if they caught sight of the redskins in time, they could streak it down there, these folks could."

"Yes. Or the fort men would mighty soon charge up here to their help, I've no doubt."

It was a day in winter, though not a wintery day, but mild, bright and sunshiny, as the end of February is apt to be in this climate. Both the man and the boy were in their shirt-sleeves. The grass was already green in spots, buds were swelling in the soft air, and birds were warbling merrily, delightedly from every bush and tree, and even from the grassy hill-sides.

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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Moving on down the valley at the oxen's deliberate gait, the wagon crossed two branches and at length was nearing the third. This was a timber-bordered watercourse, now dry, that came down from the high prairie on the east and cut westward across the prairie valley to the creek. Here the noisy blows of hammers and axes could be plainly heard. There were two log cabins on this side of the branch; and through the leafless tree-tops glimpses could be caught of numerous other cabins beyond the strip of woods.

Following the road, the wagon entered the woods, crossed the branch, and was soon crawling up a wooded slope beyond. Seventy-five yards farther on it merged upon prairie. Now the boy, who had never been here before, was gazing ahead eagerly.

"And so that's Fort Blocker, is it, pa?"

"Yes. This is where the settlers are fortin' up," the man replied, as he tapped one of the oxen with his whip.

The boy continued to gaze. What he saw was a nearly level square of two or three acres, enclosed by four rows of log cabins. Moving on, the wagon passed through the open corner and was entering the square. A few of the cabins had a new look, but most of them were more or less weather-beaten. The fort itself was new—so new that all the prairie grass out in the square had not yet been trampled down. But many of the houses had once stood elsewhere. They had been torn to pieces, hauled here, and built up again.

Most of them were finished, and women standing in the doors or children playing in the front yards showed

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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that the cabins were occupied. But several, on different sides of the square, were still lacking roofs or chimneys, or even parts of the walls; and workmen were now busy on them.

After entering the square, the ox-wagon passed round the woodpile which lay out in front of the first house on the west side, then turned and drove into a big open space between that house and the next one beyond. Here it stopped.

Now a man came out at the door of the first house. "Howdy, Mr. Dayberry—howdy—howdy!" he greeted, in loud-voiced cordiality.

The driver of the wagon turned in his seat on the logs. "Howdy, Mr. Wilkins! How do you come on—how do you come on by this time?"

"Nothin' to complain of. This fine weather ought to make everybody feel like spring colts."

"So it ought—that it ought."

"What you loaded with? House-logs?"

Mr. Dayberry nodded. "Yes. Thought I'd fetch down a little armful this mornin'—as many as the oxens can walk along with. Wanted to make a start t'wards movin' the old woman and the young ones down."

"So you finally concluded to come and fort up with us, did you? When you was here a few days ago to look around, I purty nigh 'lowed you'd stick to that place you'd just bought."

"And you 'lowed about right, Mr. Wilkins. On the way home from here I fully made up my mind that me and the folks would tough it out up there, come what might. But that raid the next day made me feel a little

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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juberous, and started me to thinkin' things over ag'in. And somehow I got it into my noggin that it's better to be safe than sorry. Seems a little lonesome up there, so many families have deserted their homesteads. Griffins has moved down here, and Miller has moved down, and Uncle Johnny McDan'l has moved down, from Blocker Creek; and you pulled up and left Williams Creek to shift for itself. Not many folks left around there these days. Lorin's, up at the head of Blocker, and Perryman and Chunky Joe Wilson over in the edge of the Timbers, they're about all that have got the spunk to stay it out. And they're all too fur from me to be called neighbors—too fur to hear us if we hollered for help. So me and my wife and the boy, we talked things over, and it din't take us long to make up our minds that Fort Blocker is the best place for us. And here we air, with load number one."

Mr. Wilkins nodded approvingly. "You're doin' the wise thing, to my way of thinkin'. Right smart job to tear our houses to pieces, and then haul them and all the rest of our belongin's down here and put 'em together ag'in. But it might be a bigger job to stay out than to move. And it's no end of bother to drive up to your place every day to farm it and keep an eye on your loose stock. But oh my! you sleep so much sounder at night! Well worth the trouble, I find it. It's strainin'—downright strainin' on a feller's nerves to be everlastingly listenin' for a war-whoop, 'specially at night when he wants to sleep."

"It is that very thing, Mr. Wilkins—certain and shore it is. I've been tryin' it for a straight fifteen

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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year now. It don't seem quite so bad as it did at first, but it still goes mightily ag'inst the grain at times."

"No frontiersman will say no to that, I guess. But it'll be a relief to you to git down here. And then you can feel so much easier in your mind when you're out with the scouts, to know that your wife and children are not in danger."

"Oh yes—yes. That's the main thing that's drivin' me to the fort, of course. True, I've got a boy back there that can shoot about as well as his old daddy—better sometimes. If the Comanches attackted the house when I was away from home, I ruther reckon he could put up a purty lively fight for his ma and the little shavers. That is, if he didn't take the buck-augur too bad. But—"

"But it's better for 'im to be where there ain't much danger of havin' to fight at home. He can git all the fightin' he's hungry fur when he's out on the range. In fact, a feller's apt to run into a scrimmage every time he venchers out of sight of a house here. Mighty troublesome, the red boogers air, here along Red River. Worse than anywheres else, ruther seems like. And watch as close as they can, and ride as hard as they can, the scouts cain't keep little bunches of the sly red wolves from slippin' through and raidin' the settlements every onct in a while."

The two men went on with their conversation. When the wagon had first stopped, the boy on the back end of the load of logs had sprung up, rifle in hand, intending to jump to the ground. But his elevated position afforded such a good view that he only stood still and

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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gazed about him. When his father alluded to him and his shooting, he turned for a moment or two; but his dark eyes were soon busy again, taking in everything. First they traveled around the square, jumping from cabin to cabin, and noting what cabins were completed and what others the workmen were still busy on.

Then the young observer glanced over the background in which this rude frontier fort was framed. The east line of houses was strung along the foot of a prairie hill, which rose steeply and overlooked the fort. The square itself was prairie, without a tree. But on three sides woods came almost up to the houses. On the north was the wooded branch which the wagon had just crossed. A little south of the fort was a similar branch, but with a narrower strip of woods. Just west of the west row of cabins the land began to slope downward to the creek, which was perhaps three hundred yards away. And all that sloping land was woods and brush. The course of the creek itself could easily be followed by the towering cottonwoods and sycamores which grew along its banks. Beyond the creek, the boy noticed, were more woods and brush, only a narrow strip, from the far edge of which rose abruptly another range of hills, so lofty that to him they looked like mountains. Scattering live-oaks clung to the upper parts of their grassy, gravelly sides. And down through their midst cut a deep, wooded ravine, or gorge.

Having completed their inspection of the background, the dark eyes came back to the fort and began to move along the rows of log cabins again.

“Did you never see a fort before?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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The voice was low, soft and pleasant. The boy standing on the logs looked down. In the door of that nearest house stood a girl of about twelve years, dressed in homespun. She was watching him, modestly, but with a half-amused smile on her lips.

“No, I didn’t—this fort nor any other fort.”

He had turned his eyes and was gazing across the square again, when the girl said:

“I thought you hadn’t, from the way that you stared.”

The boy blushed. Now he looked at the girl instead. And, with her dark hair, her fair, almost dainty features, her soft, dark-blue eyes and her slender young figure, he found her very pleasant to gaze at.

“Are you and your folks going to move to Fort Blocker?”

The boy nodded. “This is the first load of logs for our house. We’ll be next-door neighbors to you all.”

“Where do you live now?”

The boy pointed. “Up the creek—about two miles and a half.”

“Must be new-comers, you must. I never saw you before.”

“That’s just what we are—new-comers.”

“Don’t you wish you lived some place where Indians never kill and scalp people?”

“I don’t know.”

The girl waited in vain for him to explain. “Why don’t you know?” she finally demanded.

“Just because I don’t. I’ve never thought much about it.”

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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“Did you ever live where the Comanches were troublesome before?”

“I’ve never lived anywhere else. Parker County is just as bad for redskins as Cooke County dare be.”

“Did you ever see any of ’em—Indians?”

The boy nodded significantly. “You’d better guess I have! Three times!”

“What were you doing when you saw ’em?”

“Once I was up on top of a big hill, and they passed along in the valley below.”

“Did they see you?”

“Guess not. If they did they didn’t let on. And you bet I didn’t let on like I saw them, either.”

“And the other times?”

“Once I heard ’em before they got in sight, and I was peeping out of a sumac thicket when they rode by. The other time—the last time I was lying flat as a pancake on my pony, putting the quirt to ’im as fast as I could lay it on!”

The girl looked much interested. “Did you outrun ’em?”

“Wouldn’t be in Fort Blocker to-day if I hadn’t.” He grinned.

Here somebody in the back part of the house called to the girl, and she disappeared. The boy watched the door for two or three minutes, but she failed to come back. He was disappointed. For, though he couldn’t have told why, he rather liked to talk to that girl.

Tiring of watching an empty doorway, he turned his eyes toward the opposite side of the fort. The first object of interest that he noticed was a boy of about his

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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own size, coming across the square from the south side, and swinging an empty water-bucket as he came. The two boys gazed at each other. Soon the boy with the bucket changed his course, so as to pass by the load of logs. He was bare-footed and wore a pair of homespun pantaloons, much patched, and held up by one cloth "gallus." His shirt, too, was homespun; and a floppy-brimmed old wool hat covered his head.

"Howdy!" he greeted.

"How're you!" returned the boy on the wagon.

"That your rifle?"

The other nodded. "That's just whose it is."

"Can you shoot much with it?"

"Not to brag on."

"Could you kill a deer?"

"If I hit 'im in the right spot."

"But could you hit 'im?"

"That all depends. Sometimes I can, and then again sometimes I can't. I hit this fellow I've got on." He glanced down at his buckskin pantaloons.

The boy on the ground gazed interestedly at the same pantaloons, somewhat soiled and much worn though they were. "Kill 'im plumb dead the first pop?"

The boy on the wagon nodded. "Dead enough to skin the first pop. He wasn't in sight, either. He'd gone into a thicket, and all I had to take aim at was the bushes moving."

The girl had come to the door again, and a much smaller girl was standing with her. The boy with the rifle glanced toward them, but the boy with the bucket was gazing admiringly at those deerskin pantaloons.

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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“Was your pap with you?”

The other boy shook his head. “Gone to town, pa was.”

“Nobody else close by to tell you how?”

“Nobody at all.”

The eyes of the boy on the ground opened wide with wonder. “My! but I don’t see how you done it!” he exclaimed, admiringly.

“Easy enough if you aim right.”

“I’m goin’ to have a rifle like yo’r’n before so very long.”

“Where do you expect to get it?”

The boy on the ground remained silent.

“Is your pa going to buy it for you?”

The other only shook his head.

“Is your grandpa going to die and leave you his rifle?”

Another shake of the head.

“Then how do you expect to get it?”

“That’s for me to know and other folks to find out. I won’t tell anybody how I’m goin’ to git that rifle.”

“Nobody at all?”

“Narry livin’ soul! Leastways not till I’ve got it. After that no tellin’ what. Are you goin’ to live in the fort, you and your folks?”

The other nodded. “This is our first load.”

“I’m glad you air. The more boys we have here, the better I’ll be pleased—and girls too,” he added, catching sight of the two in the doorway.

As both boys turned their eyes toward the door, the older girl hastily, shyly drew back into the house.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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"I've started after water. Would you like to go down and see the spring—the Blue Spring everybody calls it. Though I don't see why. It ain't any bluer than other springs as fur as I can make out. That's where all of us go for water. No wells here. You'll have to pack water from there, too, when you git moved."

The boy on the wagon turned toward his father, who by this time was deep in recital of frontier experiences with the other man.

"Pa, will I have time to run down and see the spring?"

"Why, yes, I reckon so." Mr. Dayberry went on talking.

The boy sprang lightly to the ground, then stood his rifle in the chimney-corner of the cabin. The two boys passed round the cabin and started down a well-beaten path toward the creek.

"What's your name?" inquired the boy with the bucket.

"Thaddeus Dayberry."

"Thaddeus—do they call you that?"

"Only when the preacher comes. Other times they call me Thad. What's your name?"

"Charles Richard Sheegog."

"Do they call you that—all that?"

"Naw," scornfully. "Folks call me Charley Dick—all except ma. She calls me Dicky."

"Yes, I know. My ma calls me Thaddy."

They grinned at each other, and after that they felt better acquainted.

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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Not many yards below the fort the water-path led by the frame of a good-sized building, unusually large for this country. Two men were at work on the frame, hammering noisily. The new boy gazed at them.

“My! but that’ll be a whopper of a house, won’t it? What are they going to make there?”

“A mill.”

“A mill-house, is it? What’ll run the mill?”

“Oxens.”

“On a big wheel?”

“Climbin’ one side of a big, tilted wheel. Ever see a ox-mill?”

Thad nodded. “I’ve been to mill to ’em, time and again. Who’s going to run it?”

“Mr. Hart, I guess—Tim Hart. He’s that big man over there on the other side. It’s his mill.”

The two boys moved on slowly down the path through the woods.

“Who was the girl we saw standing in the door up there?” Thad soon inquired.

“Why, that was Marzee Wilkins—the big one. The other was her little sister, Florence.”

“Marzee. Never heard that name before. But she’s pretty nice to look at.”

“Yes. She’s about the best-lookin’ girl in Fort Blocker, so the boys thinks. I ain’t any great hand for girls myself. Leastways, I ain’t al’ays hangin’ around ’em, like some boys is. Still, cain’t say as I’ve got anything ag’in ’em. They’re good enough, sech as they air.”

By this time the two were at the creek, going down

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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the bank. Having followed up the gravelly creek-bed for several yards, they stopped at the spring, which issued from under the east bank. The water was very clear, and perhaps a yard deep. The spring had been walled up with stone, so that a bucket could be dipped in. It was well shaded by trees and overhanging brush; and a clear, cold-looking little stream flowed out of the spring and across the gravel to a pool against the west bank.

“I tell you, this is the kind of a spring I like to see!” exclaimed Thad, gazing down into its clear depths eagerly.

“And it’s just as nice to drink out of as it is to look at. Try it.” There was a gourd in the bucket, and Charley Dick held it out. “It was this spring that made ’em put the fort here.”

Thad took the gourd, dipped up some water and drank. “It’s all right,” he declared. “But wouldn’t this be a fine place to come on a broiling day, when you’re hot and thirsty?”

“I’ll just bet it would—a bully place.”

After they had talked a few minutes, Charley Dick dipped up his bucket of water, and the two boys climbed the bank and started back up the path, each holding one side of the bail. Before going far they saw a big boy coming with an empty bucket, and accompanied by two smaller boys.

“That big chap’s Buck Thompson,” Charley Dick remarked. “Most of the boys here think the sun just rises and sets in Buck—and some of the girls, too. But I don’t think so. Him and me hain’t never quarreled,

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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but we don't love each other like brothers—not quite.”

“What's the matter with 'im?”

“Oh, nothin' very bad. There's lots of worse boys than Buck, and better ones, too—more better than worse, though, I guess. If you want to be Buck's friend, you've got to fetch and carry for Buck—just what I won't do for any boy, big or little.”

Soon the two parties met. “Hello, little Dicky Sheegoggle!” greeted the big boy. His age was fifteen or sixteen.

“Hello, big Bucky Tomp!” was the prompt reply. “Takin' the little boys along to pack your water for you, I see!”

“And you've got the new boy to help you pack yo'r'n, I see!” Buck called back.

Charley Dick made no further reply. Soon he remarked:

“Buck's about as nice as he's purty, and about as purty as a mud fence stake-and-ridered with bullfrogs. Where you livin' now, Thad?”

“Two or three miles up Blocker.”

“Dayberry—oh yes! I know now. You're newcomers up there. Where you frum?”

“Parker County. Pa made a trip up here last fall, and took a look at all this country—Cooke County and Montague County both. Then he went back home and sold out, and we moved up into Montague and stayed there a while, close to Montague town. But pa didn't like to live in the woods, and when he bought he bought land out here. At the time we moved onto our new place, we thought we'd stay up there; and then again

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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we thought we wouldn't. And we've kept on thinking we wouldn't."

They were now back in the square, and Charley Dick took the bucket.

"Come over and see me, Thad, just as soon as you git moved down. I live in that new house yander on the south side. Me and you'll git along all right together. I mighty nigh know we will."

"Don't see why we shouldn't. Yes, I'll come, and you come to see me."

Mr. Wilkins was helping Mr. Dayberry, and the two men had most of the logs unloaded.

"Thad, fetch your gun and let's be goin'," Mr. Dayberry said, when the last log was off. "We must git two loads more hauled to-day."

The man seated himself on the bolster, to drive. Thad sat back on the hind hounds, with the rifle across his lap. They passed out at the northwest corner of the square, then drove away up the valley, by Parson Witt's place, as they had come.

Two more loads of logs they hauled down that day, and another the following morning. The next load was puncheons for the floor and clapboards for the roof. The last load hauled the second day was made up of household goods and the family.

With the usual frontier hospitality, not only Mr. Wilkins and his wife, but most of the other settlers as well, came and invited, persuaded, coaxed, urged and almost commanded the new-comers to share their crowded cabins. But the weather was still fine, and Mrs. Dayberry answered that unless there was a change

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## A NEW BOY MOVES TO THE FORT

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they would be comfortable enough out of doors. So, in spite of many protests, the family went into camp just a few yards back of where their house was to stand, in the edge of the woods. The wagon-bed was on now, and covered with bows and sheet. Mrs. Dayberry and the younger children slept in that. Her husband and Thad made their bed on the ground under the wagon. Their supper they cooked and ate by a camp-fire.



## II

### THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

LONG before daylight next morning, Mr. Dayberry and Thad were awake and out of bed. The moon was shining dimly. While the man rekindled their camp-fire, which had died down to one blowing coal, Thad caught up the water-bucket and set off toward the spring. When he came back, his mother was dressed and out of the wagon, ready to begin breakfast. Lights were glimmering all around the fort by this time.

Mr. Dayberry and Thad did not wait, but set to work at once to lay the foundation of their new home. The building would stand at least a foot above the ground. Stones to support the corners were already here, and the two builders, aided by moonlight and firelight, quickly got them in place. The four foundation logs—two sills and two end logs—were soon resting on the stones. Next the sleepers were laid on the sills, at the proper distances apart, and the floor of puncheons was spread over the sleepers.

Daylight was now at hand, and Marzee Wilkins came out to say that her mother was preparing breakfast for both her own family and the campers. Mrs. Dayberry answered that she herself had breakfast almost ready, and, by way of returning the courtesy, sent back an invitation for the Wilkinses to come out and eat.

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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After breakfast, before he and his father had begun work again, Thad saw Marzee out in her back yard and said to her:

“Do you like living in a fort?”

“Yes, I do. I like it ever so much better than living away off by ourselves. We settled up on Williams Creek, about two miles from here. Our place is across the ridge to the east from where pa says your pa bought. I’ve been over to your place visiting, time and again. Lonesomest country anybody ever lived in, Williams Creek is. It’s not settled like Blocker. Nobody at all on the creek above us; and it’s a good piece below to the first settler. Here a body can sleep. But up there I’d lie awake shivering at night, listening to the owls hooting. They say Indians can hoot like owls. Every time I’d hear two owls, I’d think it might be two Indians hooting to each other—ugh!”

Thad laughed. “I’ve heard that, too. But I’d never really thought of putting Indians and owls together. For me, they can stay off in the woods and hoot, hoot, hoot all they want to, the redskins can. Fact is, I don’t worry much about the boogers when I’m at home. They don’t often kill people in houses. But take care if they catch you out!”

“No, they don’t often kill people in their houses—that’s so,” admitted Marzee. “But they have done such a thing, ever so many times. You know that. And what has been may be again. We’re none too safe, even here. Pa says they’ve got thousands of warriors, the Comanches have. He says if they once took it into their heads to, they could come down here strong enough to

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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wipe the frontier settlements off the earth, and this fort with 'em."

"Yes, guess maybe they could do that, but I doubt if they will."

"Pa says if they happened to come full force, all the scouts the whites would be able to muster could no more stop 'em than they could stop Red River from running, or the wind from blowing."

"Guess that's about right. The few scouts around here wouldn't be a drop in a bucket to 'em. For all that, though, I don't believe the red boogers will dare try it. They do dearly love to kill and scalp white folks. But they're tender-footed when it comes to risking their own precious skins. They could wipe the fort clean out, I guess; but they know that when they got through there'd be more dead redskins than whites."

"I do hope they won't come. But let's talk about something else. That makes me feel shivery. Are you all going to give a house-raising?"

"That I don't know. But we'll get our house up the best way we can. We numbered every log, pa and I did, when we tore the house down. And we've got each log on its own side—or end. Of course, they're all notched, just ready to lay up. It oughtn't to take long to build the walls again."

"How did you number 'em?" inquired Marzee.

"Why, we marked its number on each log—marked it with charcoal."

The Dayberrys made no regular house-raising. But while Thad and his father were putting up three more rounds, which was as high as they could lift the logs,

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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Mr. Wilkins went around the square, from house to house, and spoke to such men as were now in the fort. Soon six or eight of them came together at the Dayberry camp, and another cabin began to rise. Every log's place being indicated by its number, and there being no notching to do, the four walls were up by noon. After dinner the same men returned and built up the gable-ends, which were also of logs, and put the roof-poles on.

Now the helpers went away, and Mr. Dayberry and Thad proceeded to cover the house.

Most of the roofs here were not nailed on, nor were rafters used. The boards were simply laid on roof-poles, a course at a time, and then each course was secured in place by a weight-pole laid on the boards. This made it easy for the settlers to move their houses.

It was a weighted roof that Mr. Dayberry and Thad were putting on. Thad carried in boards and reached them up, while his father, sitting on the roof poles, laid the boards in place. As they were a yard long, not many courses would be required. When night settled down, the two workers had the west side of the roof on, and the bottom course of the east side.

After supper a candle was lighted in the house, and the big walnut bedstead, their only pretentious piece of furniture, was carried in from the wagon and screwed together. Then the cord, after being passed from side to side many times, was stretched very tight, a straw-bed laid on the cord, and a feather-bed laid on the straw-bed.

This bedstead was unusually high. For the children

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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of the family there was a trundle-bed, a little, short-legged bedstead on little wooden wheels. The trundle-bed could be rolled under the big bed in the daytime, to get it out of the way, and rolled out at night when it was to be occupied. Indeed, the children could sleep on it under the other bed, if necessary.

So all the family slept inside of walls and under part of a roof that night.

The weather was still warm next morning, but there were now indications of rain. Mr. Dayberry and Thad were up before they could see, and at work on the roof by the time they could see. When breakfast was ready at the camp-fire, the roofers stopped barely long enough to eat, then fell to work again. Encouraged by an occasional raindrop, they worked as fast as they could. By the middle of the forenoon the last board was on and the last weight-pole in place.

And the roof had been completed not a minute too soon. The rain began to patter on the newly laid boards while Mr. Dayberry was climbing down the gable-end. And it kept up its patter, patter, patter all the rest of the day.

Mrs. Dayberry, aided by Thad when he was not busy handing up boards, had already finished unloading the wagon, carrying into the house such of their household goods as had not been carried in the night before. So the family and all their belongings were now sheltered from the weather. Dinner and supper were cooked at the Wilkinse's fireplace.

Next morning was bright and clear and sharply cool. There was still much work to do on the house. Even be-

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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fore breakfast Thad tramped over to the high prairie to the west and came back with Spot and Jerry, the oxen; and after breakfast he and his father drove out to a rocky hill-side and brought home a wagon-load of stone for their fireplace. There was a wooden frame, shaped like a fireplace, which had been built up at the same time with the house-walls. But the frame had to be lined with stone. In the absence of lime for mortar, the workers laid the stone in clay, which they carried from the bank of the branch on the west side of the creek.

When the fireplace, a huge one nearly five feet wide, had been completed, the two workers again drove out upon the prairie, and kept driving about till they came upon a patch of mesquite grass. There, with a spade, they cut big blocks of sod till their wagon-bed was full. Then they drove home, stopping the wagon against the wooden frame that supported the stone fireplace. From the wagon they proceeded to build up their sod chimney on top of the wood and stone. To make the sod more rigid, clapboards were laid between the layers at every second round.

Huge thing that the chimney was, though rather short, several wagon-loads of sod were required to complete it. Flat stones for the hearth had already been hauled, and these were now put in place.

“Thad, fetch in a chunk of fire,” said Mr. Dayberry. “Cool enough for fire anyhow; and we want to see how much pull there is to her.

So Thad brought in a chunk from the camp-fire where his mother was cooking supper. Soon they had

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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another fire started, in the big fireplace. As the flames began to leap upward through the wood, Mr. Dayberry cried out:

“Now, children, grab the cat! And whatever you do, hold her tight!”

Little five-year-old Carrie ran at once and seized the animal. “But what must we hold her for?” she wanted to know.

“Why, to keep the new chimley from suckin’ her right up!”

Carrie, clasping the patient cat stoutly in her arms, hurried outside to her mother. “Ma, pa says if we don’t hold the cat, the new chimley will suck her right up!” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with something akin to awe.

“Don’t you fret, honey! Your pa’s only joking. That chimney will do mighty well—better than most sod chimneys, if it sucks all the smoke up, let alone cats.”

The new chimney drew fairly well. Having now a fireplace to cook by and warm themselves by, instead of a camp-fire out in the yard, the family could live in reasonable comfort—frontier comfort—in their one room.

They had another log house, not so large as this one, up at the farm, and would have been glad to move it down at once. But the advancing season warned that Mr. Dayberry and Thad must do some farm-work without further delay. So the man announced that they would haul the second house a little at a time.

Next morning after the sod chimney had been completed, he and Thad, armed against Indians with a six-

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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shooter, a double-barrel shot-gun and a rifle, and against hunger with a well-filled tin bucket, got into their wagon and drove up the creek to their little farm. There they were soon busy. Thad, with the oxen hitched to a turning-plow, went to breaking ground. Mr. Dayberry fell to grubbing at the lower end of the field, in land that had been fenced but not yet reduced to cultivation. He intended to plow it later and plant sorghum cane there, for molasses.

The two worked hard till noon, then rested about an hour while they ate their dinner up by the well. Later they went to work again. Frequently, as they toiled, their eyes swept all the country within their range of vision. And their weapons were kept where they could get to them quickest.

When night was near, the two went up to the little log house and tore off the roof, leaving the rib-poles bare. They drove back to the fort with the boards in the wagon.

Every day the man and the boy went up to the farm to work; and every night they returned with their wagon loaded, or partly loaded, till the last stick of timber in their second cabin had been hauled. At the fort the material was unloaded in the rear of their principal house, where the smaller house would stand.

Now Mr. Dayberry and Thad wanted to go to work at once to rebuild the cabin, but corn-planting time was at hand, and that would not wait.

Mr. Dayberry had a little herd of horses running out on the range close by, and several of them would work in harness. But he and Thad were more accustomed

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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to driving oxen, and, like many of their neighbors, rather preferred an ox-team for farm-work. Spot and Jerry would work singly as well as together. Each had his half-yoke, and would pull a light plow as well as any horse, stopping and starting and turning obediently at words of command.

With Spot and a bull-tongue plow Mr. Dayberry went to "laying off"—plowing furrows to drop corn in. Thad dropped the corn by hand, then covered it with Jerry and a wider plow. When the boy began to fall behind with his double task, Mr. Dayberry would go back and do the covering.

After a few days the corn-planting was finished. Now Mr. Dayberry would have begun work on his second house; but the time had come when he must take his turn at scouting.

Every able-bodied man on the frontier was now enlisted for some form of military service. Two companies had their headquarters at Fort Blocker. One was made up of State troops, under command of Captain Frank Totty; the other was frontier militia, more commonly known as scouts, commanded by Captain Graham. Both of these captains lived in the fort, on the east side. The State troops might be ordered anywhere within the State; but the scouts, having enlisted only for the defense of their homes, could not be sent away from the frontier. Thad's father, as well as most of the other men living in the fort, belonged to the company of scouts.

When there was no alarm of Indians, only about half the scouts were kept on duty at a time, the others being

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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permitted to stay at home to cultivate their crops and look after their stock. But if any serious danger threatened, all could be ordered out and kept out as long as might be necessary. Their principal duty consisted in patrolling a certain line, in an effort to see that no raiding bands of Indians crossed it. This line was part of a great curved line of patrol extending from Red River to the Rio Grande. The several miles which the Fort Blocker scouts guarded ran along near the west edge of the Cross Timbers, beyond all but a few of the outermost settlers and ranches, and was a good day's travel from Fort Blocker.

"How I wish you could take my place in this scoutin' business, Thad!" Mr. Dayberry remarked, the morning he and others were to start out. His saddled horse was standing at the door, a double-barrel gun was slung to the saddle-horn, and the man was now tying a well-filled haversack behind his saddle. Also, his six-shooter was belted on, and a powder-horn hung on one side of him and an ammunition-bag on the other.

"So do I, pa," answered Thad, who, like most boys, was both ready and eager to do a man's work—readier than to do a boy's work, sometimes.

"You'll be big enough to ride out before so very long. Now you must look after your ma and the children while I'm gone. See to it that your ma has plenty of wood and water. If you run out of wood, you must yoke up the oxens and haul a little load. And if you run short of meat, you'll either have to borry some or do some huntin'. I'm expectin' to kill a hog the first northe ; after I git back."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Don’t you worry about us, pa. I’ll see to things all right.”

There was also a saddled horse standing at Mr. Wilkins’s door, and others at various other doors, including Captain Graham’s. When the captain came out and mounted, several of his men did the same; and they all came riding across the square toward the northwest corner. Every man wore his blanket; for a gusty norther was blowing this morning.

Mrs. Dayberry now appeared at her door with a blanket folded at the middle. Her husband took it, threw it around his shoulders, and fastened it with a wire blanket-pin. Then he sprang into the saddle and rode out to join his party. But when opposite the Wilkinsons’ door he stopped and called back:

“Thad, you must kind of look after Mis’ Wilkins and the girls while Mr. Wilkins is away from home. If they want anything done, you be smart and hustle out and do it for ’em.”

“Yes, sir, I will—of course I will! Anything they want me to do!” answered the boy, eagerly. For Mrs. Wilkins was standing in the door, and Marzee and little Florence were out in the front yard.

“And, Mis’ Wilkins,” Mr. Dayberry said, “don’t be afeard to call on Thad if you want anything done, or any errands run. His ma won’t have half enough to keep ’im busy. He’s able to do a lot of work, and toler’ble willin’. As long as your boys are all girls, don’t be bashful about makin’ use of mine. He’s right handy on a woodpile, and knows what to do with a water-bucket if you hand ’im one.”

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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"All right!" laughed Mrs. Wilkins. "I'll call on 'im if there's anything a girl can't do. I've always found 'im more than willing to help."

The blanketed scouts rode away, fourteen in number, and every one with a gun across the saddle in front of him. Thad stood gazing enviously after them.

"Don't you wish you were big enough to ride with 'em?" asked Marzee. The others had gone in and shut the door.

"Yes, I do. That is, I mean I wish they'd let me. I'm big enough already," insisted Thad.

The girl did not dispute that. "Wouldn't you be afraid of the Indians if you did go?" she inquired.

"Well, not so overly much. Everybody's afraid of 'em some."

"I'm afraid of 'em more than some. I'm afraid a whole lot," admitted the girl.

"Not afraid here, are you?"

"Well, no; not here in the fort. I don't guess there's much danger here. But I was forever afraid while we lived up on Lonesome Creek. That's what we called Williams Creek most of the time. And I know I'd be afraid again if we moved back up there."

Here Thad's mother came to the door and called him. He hurried home.

"Thaddy, don't you think you can make us an ash-hopper? Of course we could wait till your pa comes back; but a lot of ashes would go to waste by that time."

"Why, yes, ma; guess I can. I've never made one, but I know how. Yes, I'll go to work on it right away—as soon as I can chop up some wood."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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A little later the boy was out in front of the house, busy with his axe. The Dayberrys' woodpile, like everybody else's in Fort Blocker, was a dozen or fifteen steps from their front door. After chopping two big armfuls of wood and carrying them in, Thad passed over to the Wilkinsons' woodpile, where he chopped fully as much. Then he shouldered the axe and set off down into the timber.

Near the creek he found a not very large tree and chopped it down. Having severed the top from the trunk, he split open the trunk, which was hollow. One half was all he wanted. But after getting it upon his shoulder, and staggering along with it a few steps, he found the green wood too much for his strength and threw it down.

Then he went up the valley, guided by a bell, till he found Spot and Jerry. He had driven them home and was putting the yoke on them, when he noticed a boy approaching.

"Hello, Charley Dick Sheegog! Where've you been all this time? Not a glimpse have I caught of you since that first day—the day pa and I brought our first load of logs to the fort."

"Been over to my uncle's—Uncle Dan Bedford's. Had to go out on the scout, Uncle Dan did, and he wanted me to stay with Aunt Em and the girls for company. Got girls and girls, Uncle Dan has, but narry single, solitary boy. I like to stay over there. Aunt Em's such a bully cook. She al'ays has pies and sweet-cakes and other good things to eat. She's great, Aunt Em is. Where you startin' now, Thad?"

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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“To drag home a trough for an ash-hopper. Want to go with me?”

“That I do!”

They were soon on the way, Thad driving, and Charley Dick holding up the log-chain.

When they came back, stopping behind the house, they were dragging not only the trough, but four forks and four poles for the frame to support the boards. After Spot and Jerry had been unyoked and turned loose, the trough was placed on stones, the forks were set up in the ground, and the four poles laid in them. There was a plenty of clapboards at hand, and the hopper was soon completed. It was a wedge-shaped receptacle for ashes, with the edge of the wedge in the trough. When the hopper was filled, water poured on the ashes would run down through them, and then out at the lower end of the trough as lye.

Thad now called his mother out to inspect their work.

“You boys seem to have made a first-class job of it,” Mrs. Dayberry said. “That ought to hold ashes all right. But it’ll take us all summer long to fill it, so late in the season. This norther will soon blow itself out. I’ve been thinking we shall have to go back up to our farm to make soap this year. We’ll see, though. If you’re through here, you might get the water-bucket and run to the spring for me, Thaddy.”

“All right, ma. Want to go, Charley Dick?”

Yes, Charley Dick wanted to go. The two boys were soon on the way. As they passed the Wilkins house, Marzee opened the door.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Oh, Thad, wait! I’ve got something for you—you and Charley Dick!”

She disappeared, but soon came to the door again, holding out a piece of reddish-brown stuff to each boy.

“Molasses candy!” cried Thad, his face lighting up.

“Did you cook it, Marzee?” Charley Dick wanted to know, as he reached for his piece eagerly.

“Yes; or anyhow I helped. It’s not so very good, but maybe it’ll beat none at all.”

“That it will—you better believe it will, Marzee!” Thad answered. “I do dearly love molasses candy!”

“I saved that piece just for you,” the girl told him.

Thad looked pleased. “That was good of you, Marzee. How did you come to think of me?”

“Because—well, I guess it was because you’re always so ready to do things for us.”

“I’ll do lots of things for you. And I like this candy better than any I ever tasted.”

“Better than store candy?”

Thad’s mouth was full, but he gave a very emphatic nod.

“Oh, now, you don’t, either! You know you don’t!” protested Marzee. But she looked very much pleased.

“Didn’t you save this piece for me, too, Marzee?”

“Why, no, Charley Dick; I can’t say that I did.”

But, seeing the boy’s disappointment, she added: “How could I? I didn’t even know you’d come home.”

“But you would have if you had knowed, wouldn’t you?”

“Ye-es, guess maybe I would. Anyhow, I’ll save you some of the next we make.”

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## THAD, CHARLEY DICK AND MARZEE

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Charley Dick's freckled face radiated its satisfaction. He thrust the candy into his mouth.

"I'll do anything for you that you want me to do," Thad removed the candy from his mouth to remark.

"So'll I, Marzee," declared Charley Dick. "I'll go pack you a bucket of water this minute if you say the word."

"Buckets all full just now."

The two boys went on to the spring. While returning, carrying their water between them, they saw the girl near the door again.

"Marzee, I ate all that candy you gave me, and then licked my fingers," Thad called to her.

"So did I—it was so good," put in Charley Dick. "And I licked my fingers cleaner than he did."

"You didn't—no such thing!" protested Thad, indignantly.

"You must have been starved for candy, both of you," laughed Marzee, so softly, good-naturedly, that the boys' indignation melted away.

When the two water-carriers came to Thad's home, his mother said:

"Thaddy, I've been thinking you and I had better go up to the farm right away, and run lye and make soap. What do you say?"

"I'll tell you, ma. You won't be needed at first. I'll go up and run the lye, and then you can go with me and we'll both make the soap. I can run the lye as well as you can."

"All right, then. You'd better make a trip up there to-morrow, I think; or maybe—"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“I’ll have to haul the pots up. Hadn’t I better do that after dinner to-day? While I’m there I can water the hopper. Take it a good while to get started, anyhow.”

“That will be a wise idea.”

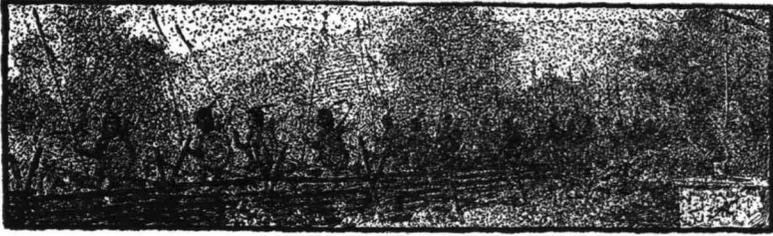
“Want to go with me, Charley Dick?”

“Yes. If ma hain’t got anything she wants done, I’ll jump at the chance to go.”

“All right; run home and ask her. Tell her if she’ll let you help me run lye, I’ll help you work any time you need me.”

Charley Dick hurried away across the square. Very soon he was back and announcing:

“It’s all right. She says I can go.”



### III

#### WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

IMMEDIATELY after dinner Thad and Charley Dick drove home the oxen, yoked them and put them to the wagon. Now they lifted the big wash-pots in and were ready to start.

“Have you got a gun—any kind of a gun, Charley Dick?”

The other boy shook his head. “Not yit. Will have one before long, though.”

“Where’ll it come from?”

“That I won’t tell.”

“Are you counting on shooting a redskin and taking his gun? They don’t carry guns, most redskins don’t.”

“That ain’t how at all! I’ve got a way to git things that nobody but me don’t know about.” Charley Dick looked like a walking mystery.

Thad’s curiosity was aroused. “Won’t you tell me?”

Charley Dick considered. “If you’d promise not to tell, and to tell me things, reckon maybe I might.”

“All right. I’ll keep it dark. But I don’t know anything to tell you.”

“But when you find out sumpn, you’ll tell me, won’t you, Thad?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“That I will. I’ll tell you first one.”

“Things you won’t tell anybody else?”

“Things I won’t tell anybody else.”

“All right, then. How I’m to git that gun is I seen a star shoot, and wished. If you make a wish just as soon as you see a star shoot, your wish will come true. And I wished for a rifle—a new rifle with double triggers.”

Thad’s eagerness died suddenly. “Reckon you’ll get it?”

“Why, of course I will! If what folks says is so, I’m just bound to git it. And why would they say such a thing if it ain’t so? You’ve heard folks say that lots of times, hain’t you, Thad?”

“Yes, I’ve heard it. But I don’t recollect anybody that ever got anything that way. I’ve never tried it myself. But if it fetches you that rifle with double triggers, no telling but what I will. I don’t have to wish for a gun. Got that already.”

“Yes, I know. How did you come by your gun, Thad?”

“Why, my grandpa died and left me his. But it’s not any fun to get things that way—by somebody going and dying. I’d a whole lot rather get a gun by wishing like you did—like you’re going to.”

“How did your grandpap come to die and leave you his gun, Thad?”

“He didn’t die. I mean he wouldn’t have died when he did, but he was shot. That was down in Parker County.”

“How did he happen to git shot?”

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## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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“Same way most folks get shot that do get shot. Redskins. They got after 'im, but he fought 'em till the last. They ran onto 'im out on the prairie, and he made for the nighest timber. They shot three arrows into 'im while he was running, but he reached the woods all right. There he hunkered down in the forks of a big log and fought 'em off for a whole half-day. He made 'em keep their distance, too, grandpa did. He killed two or three of the boogers, so everybody thought. Anyhow, the Indians went off at last and left 'im alone, and he got up and walked home. He was pretty badly wounded, but the doctor thought he'd get well. After about a week, though, he took lung-fever, and that carried 'im off quick. But before he died he said I was to have his rifle.”

“Is it a good rifle, Thad?”

“As good as the best. Grandpa had a gunsmith make it for 'im. It's a flintlock, though.”

“How come it a flintlock instead of the cap kind?”

“Grandpa wouldn't have any but a flintlock. He poked fun at the new-fangled guns—that's what he called the others. Said they were better than none, but not good enough for him. Bragged that he never went to a shooting-match in his life without bringing home the prize. He always thought that it was his gun that did it; but pa says grandpa's straight shooting was the main thing. And he surely was a fine shot, grandpa was. I'll go and get the gun. We'll take it with us.”

When Thad came out, he was carrying not only the rifle, but his powder-horn and wolf-skin ammunition-bag as well.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Charley Dick examined the rifle carefully, even opening the pan and looking at the priming-powder. Then he laid the gun across a log at the corner of the house, and took aim at a spot on a tree.

“And this is the very same weepion your grandpap made the redskins skedaddle with?” he asked, eagerly.

Thad nodded. “The very same. And besides the two or three Indian warriors, it’s knocked over many a deer and turkey, to say nothing of wolves and catamounts and wildcats.”

They had laid the gun in the wagon, and were climbing in themselves, when Mrs. Dayberry came home from across the square.

“Thaddy, Mrs. McDan’l says we’re welcome to her two big kettles to make soap in. You’d better drive by and take them with you. The more lye you can run the better.”

“All right, ma.”

So the boys stopped at Uncle Johnny McDaniel’s house, on the north side, for more pots. From there they drove out at the northwest corner of the square, and on up the valley by Parson Witt’s place. When at length they had arrived at the Dayberry farm, they loosed the oxen from the tongue, then took the four pots out, lifted them over the rail-fence, and carried them down to the ash-hopper.

There was no house here now that had been used as a residence; but a corn-crib stood not far from the hopper, and a rod or two down the slope toward the field was a little log granary covered with straw. Everything was inside the field-fence. A good number

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## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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of chickens, yet to be taken to the fort, were running around near the crib. There were also five stands of bees scarcely more than a dozen steps from the ash-hopper. The air was rather too cool for them to be at work yet, but the sun was shining against the hollow-log hives, and the little honey-makers could be heard humming restlessly. The bees would not be moved to the fort.

Thad and his companion glanced about the premises. One thing that they noticed was a patch of feathers, where some animal had killed a chicken and devoured it.

"Wolf it must have been," Thad remarked. "Caught the poor hen before she could dodge under the crib or the granary, or fly up onto something. Only wish the sneaking booger would show up while I'm here with the gun."

They now took their water-bucket and went to the well, which was up near the fence. A well-bucket sat on the stone curb. Thad dropped the bucket through the hole, then pulled down the sweep—a long pole balanced in a high fork—till the bucket reached the water and filled itself. Then both drew it up.

"You pack and I'll draw," proposed Charley Dick. He was now standing on the curb.

"All right."

Thad poured the water from the well-bucket into the other bucket, and started to the ash-hopper with it. The hopper being inconveniently high, he dragged one of the big pots near and turned it bottom up, to stand on. With his bucket he stepped upon the pot, and was about to hollow out a place to pour the water into, when

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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some marks in the ashes caught his eye. For a minute or more he stood staring at them.

“Charley Dick—Charley Dick, run here as quick as you can!” he suddenly called out, in excited tones.

Jumping to the ground, Charley Dick came hurrying. “What is it? What have you found?” he demanded.

“Fetch something to stand on and look here!”

There being nothing else, Charley Dick dragged over another pot, inverted it and sprang upon it. Then he, too, stood staring at the marks in the ashes.

“Co’gar-tracks!” he almost gasped.

Thad nodded. “That’s just what they are. Big co’gar, too. Wonder what he was doing up here.”

“Big! You’re mighty right he was big! Biggest co’gar-tracks I ever clapped eyes on! He must be a reg’lar buster—a man-eater, that varmint!”

Thad glanced around cautiously, and then at his gun, which stood leaning against the ash-hopper. “Wonder where the booger is now.”

Charley Dick ran his eye up and down the creek. “Some’r’s down yander in the bresh, I’ll just bet,” he said. “Reckon it was this varmint that killed and et that chicken?”

“Guess it must have been. He was here after something to eat, and that hen was all he could find.”

“If that kind of a big booger is usin’ around here, we’ve got to look sharp. If we don’t, first thing we know he’ll be landin’ kerplump on top of us, before we can say scat.”

“That’s right. We must be on the watch-out.”

For a good while the two boys stood leaning on the

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## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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ash-hopper, discussing the cougar-tracks and the cougar. Finally, however, Thad hollowed out a place in the ashes with a board and poured his water in. Then they went back to the well for more.

Now Charley Dick kept the sweep running, and Thad kept carrying the water and emptying it upon the hopper, till the hollowed-out place in the ashes began to overflow. Then they had to stop. After making sure that the bees were all right, and feeding the chickens some wheat from the granary, they poured more water upon the hopper. Later they set out around the little farm. The field contained only about twenty acres, and was enclosed by a stake-and-ridered rail-fence. The east or back line of fence was against the creek, winding with the creek's windings.

Needless to say, the two boys kept a sharp watch for the cougar, as well as for Indians. But they saw neither. When they returned, from the opposite direction, Charley Dick was carrying a turkey-gobbler. Thad had shot the big bird with his flintlock.

Again they poured water upon the ash-hopper—all it would bear. They did not think it probable that lye would begin to run till some time the following day. But, lest it should, Thad had already placed a brass kettle, brought for that purpose, under the lower end of the trough.

Now, after looking in the crib, under the crib-floor, under the granary-floor and in various weedy places for hens' nests, the boys gathered up all the eggs they could find and put them on some grass in the wagon-bed, near the gobbler. Then they climbed to the top

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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of the high hill which rose just west of the fence, and drove down Spot and Jerry. Putting them to the wagon, they started back to the fort.

Though they knew that the scouts were constantly patrolling the country a day's travel to the west, the two boys were on their guard every minute. The few scouts were a wholly insufficient force; and in spite of their watchfulness little bands of warriors were liable to slip by them and raid the settlements. Indeed, they did that very often. So it behooved not only these boys, but everybody else, to be watchful.

On arriving at the fort, Thad and Charley Dick stopped the wagon under some trees back of the Day-berry house. There they took the oxen loose and unyoked them, and, after giving them some salt, turned them out to grass. Now Thad carried the turkey in to his mother.

When the two boys had chopped a pile of wood in front of Thad's home, they crossed the square and chopped up as much for Charley Dick. Later Thad came back and chopped a while at the Wilkins wood-pile. Seeing Marzee and little Florence starting to the spring, he called out:

"Wait, Marzee! I'll carry that for you!"

"I can carry it just as well as not," protested the girl. When Thad had overtaken them, she said: "But you can go with us if you want to."

So Thad walked along with the girls. When they came back, both he and Marzee had hold of the bail of her bucket, while Florence, carrying her own little half-gallon tin bucket, trotted along behind.



"BOTH HE AND MARZEE HAD HOLD OF THE BAIL OF HER BUCKET."



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## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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At an early hour next morning Thad and Charley Dick were on their way up the valley. This time they were walking. Thad was carrying his rifle, and his companion the powder-horn and ammunition-bag. Charley Dick was also carrying a tin bucket with their dinner in it.

Arriving at the farm, they found that every drop of the water had soaked into the ashes, and lye was already running in a tiny stream into the brass kettle, which was full and overflowing. They set one of the big pots with each leg on a stone, so that a fire could be kindled under it, then emptied the lye-kettle into it. They started to water the ash-hopper again; but when Thad stepped upon an inverted pot with his first bucket of water, he made another discovery. Again he called Charley Dick to come and see it.

In hollowing out the center of the ashes the day before to make a place to hold water, they had covered up all the cougar-tracks. But now fresh tracks were there, evidently made some time the night before.

"The booger must come around every night!" exclaimed Charley Dick.

"Looks like he must," agreed Thad.

They went on watering the hopper. When the hollowed-out place was full, the two busied themselves in various ways. But they never forgot to return to the hopper in time to empty the lye-kettle and keep the hollowed-out place in the ashes filled with water. Thad hunted up a hen's nest in some weeds, brought an egg, and dropped it into the lye. The egg floated high, and from that they knew that the lye was strong enough.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Every few minutes that thirsty hopper would drink another bucket of water. And as fast as it swallowed down what they had given it the boys supplied more. Soon the lye was running in a steady stream from the trough. Now the brass kettle must be dipped out and emptied often.

When the sun indicated the hour of noon, the boys sat down in the shade of the crib, the weather having grown warm again, and ate their dinner. Watering the hopper and emptying the lye kept them busy all the afternoon.

At sunset they had two big pots full of lye. Now the trough was streaming so fast that they knew gallons would be wasted during the night if they went home and left it. So they decided to spend the night here. They had told their mothers that they might have to stay, and there would be no worrying on account of their absence from the fort.

When it was beginning to grow dark, Thad took some lint-cotton from the ammunition-bag, emptied the priming-powder from the pan of his rifle upon it, and then held the lock against the cotton while he snapped it. There was a flash, which ignited the lint. Soon they had a nice little fire blazing, but a few feet from the ash-hopper.

In their bucket were some biscuits and a few slices of bacon, left from dinner. Those they warmed on sticks held over the fire. They also found several eggs and roasted them. On the bacon and biscuits and eggs the boys made their supper.

For a good while after eating they sat by their little

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## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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fire, listening to the barking and howling of wolves up on the prairie, and to the screaming of two wildcats down in the woods along the creek. Those animals they were not afraid of. But they kept a ceaseless watch for the cougar, and sat with their rifle within reach. From time to time they got up and emptied the lye-kettle. But they poured no more water on the hopper, and the stream running from the trough gradually grew weaker.

When at last Thad and his companion were finding it hard to keep their eyes open, they emptied the brass kettle again, covered their fire with ashes to keep it from going out, and went and crawled through the little square door into the corn-crib. For fear of the cougar they fastened the door securely. Not much corn was in the crib, but there was about a wagon-load of sheaf-oats, and on these they were soon asleep.

Thad had fully intended to get up from time to time to empty the lye-kettle. But so sleepy was he that several hours must have passed before he returned to consciousness. Even then he was still half asleep. The sound that had awoke him was the near-by tinkling of a little bell, such as the settlers sometimes put on their calves as an aid in finding them. While the boy was wondering vaguely, drowsily, how a calf had happened to get into the field, he heard another noise—the beating of hoofs. Quickly he sat up.

Since the boys had fallen asleep the moon had risen and was now lighting up the surroundings dimly. The hoof-beats were not very distinct at first, and Thad surmised that his father's horses were coming home

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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for salt. He was about to crawl out of the crib to empty the lye-kettle, when that noise of hoofs suddenly became much louder. The horses were crossing a rocky ravine two or three hundred yards to the north. And there was something in the clattering of the hoofs against the stones which made an impression that the animals had riders.

Soon the horses came into view, following a road between the foot of the prairie hill and the field-fence. There were more than a dozen of them, and the first glance showed him that they had riders. And, frontier boy though he was, his heart seemed to stand still when he saw that the riders were armed with bows and lances and shields!

With one hand Thad reached for the flintlock, and with the other he shook Charley Dick awake. "They're coming this way as straight as they can ride," he whispered. "Apt as not they'll stop. If they do, we may have to fight 'em."

"Hadn't we better slip out of here and make for the bresh?"

"Too late for that. They'd see us and be right after us. If we've got to fight, this is the best place. Grandpa whipped 'em from the forks of a log, and we ought to whip 'em from a corn-crib. But we'll keep as still as mice. Maybe they won't find out we're here."

As the savage horsemen drew nigh, Thad, excited though he was, distinctly heard that little bell tinkling rapidly away toward the creek. Frightened at the approaching Indians, the belled calf seemed to be scampering off down through the field.

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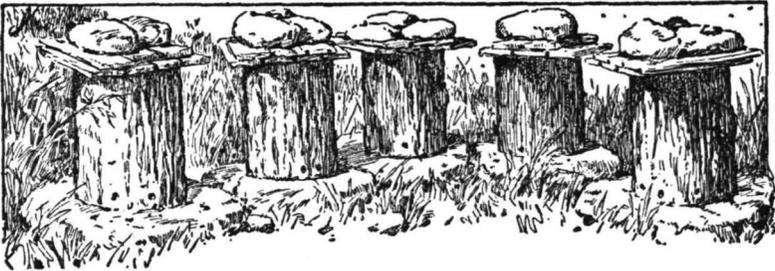
## WATERING THE ASH-HOPPER

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Soon the war-party were opposite the well. There they stopped. At first they did not get down; but after they had talked together a few minutes, about half of them dismounted and climbed over the fence. They were thirsty, and at least one of their number knew how to work a well-sweep; for he drew a bucket of water. The warriors took turns at drinking.

While the others were quenching their thirst, three of the party came on down the slope, one going toward the ash-hopper and another toward the granary. To the horror of the two watching boys, the third came straight toward the corn-crib!



## IV

### HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

HE may open the crib-door! What can we do, Thad?" For answer Thad began hastily to pile up sheaf-oats between themselves and the door. Fortunately, the approaching warrior had stopped on the way to exchange words with another warrior. As soon as the pile of sheaves was high enough, the two boys flattened themselves down behind it.

"Here, Charley Dick, you take these," whispered Thad. He passed over the ammunition-bag and powder-horn. "Fill the charger with powder. If I have to shoot, we must be able to load mighty quick. Have a bullet and some patching ready, too. And just as soon as you hand 'em to me, put a little powder in the charger again, to prime with. And, whatever you do, don't spill any of the powder," he cautioned.

Charley Dick took the things offered him, but he seemed so nervous that Thad himself filled the charger, and gave it to Charley Dick to hold.

The little door was in the west end of the crib, but the approaching warrior came to the south side first. There was a shed there, and on some high poles under the shed the chickens were roosting. The Indian did

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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not try to look between the crib-logs, but must have thrust his spear up among the fowls; for they promptly set up a noisy cackling, and some of them fluttered to the ground.

Without disturbing the roosting fowls further, the Comanche moved round to the crib-door. Soon the two boys heard the little shutter swung back against the logs. They also heard a rustling in the straw near the door, and for a few moments believed that the Comanche was actually crawling into the crib. But he was only feeling inside to learn what was there. A little later they heard his moccasined feet moving away.

When the Indian was at a safe distance, the two boys ventured to raise their heads, and even to peep out between the logs of the south wall.

The dismounted warriors were moving here and there, doubtless in quest of something to steal. Presently one of them happened upon the little camp-fire, and uncovered it. He called to his companions. They gathered round the few live chunks, and seemed to be discussing in their own tongue what the fire meant. They doubtless guessed that white people had been here recently; but it probably did not occur to them that any white people were here now.

Soon a warrior, perhaps the same who had opened the little door, took up a glowing-ended chunk and started toward the crib with it.

"He's comin' to—to set fire to us!" whispered Charley Dick. "What—what in the world can we do?"

It would be easy to fire the crib. For, in addition to the oat-straw inside, it was roofed over with a great

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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mound of crushed sorghum stalks, hauled from where molasses had been made. The little square door was the only opening, and the Indians were in front of that. The two white boys would either have to venture out there, to be shot down or captured, or remain in the crib and be roasted alive.

“If he sticks that fire in here, he’ll wish he hadn’t,” whispered Thad. He cocked his rifle noiselessly and laid it across the pile of oats, with the muzzle covering the door. “The very instant he pokes that chunk through the door, I let the booger have it! Have the powder ready, Charley Dick!”

The warrior was coming straight toward the crib-door. Having no doubt as to what would happen, Thad was looking along the rifle-barrel, taking the best aim possible in the dark. He could scarcely see the sights, but the savage was so close it would not be easy to miss him.

But just as the Comanche was on the point of reaching the fire in at the door, one of those still on their horses called to him, and he turned to reply. Perhaps the mounted Indian was questioning the prudence of firing the crib, and thus attracting attention to themselves and their movements, especially while they were here so close to the fort. The warrior by the crib seemed to be insisting that he must set fire to it. And doubtless he would have fired it had nothing prevented him.

While stalking about in quest of something worth carrying away, one of the savages had stopped at the ash-hopper, where he began to examine the brass kettle

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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under the end of the trough. The kettle was full of lye. A gourd used in dipping the lye out was lying across the trough.

From this fact the Indian must have inferred that the kettle contained something good to drink. At any rate, he dipped up a gourdful of lye and put it to his mouth. And he must have swallowed some before learning how frightfully strong the stuff was.

But he quickly discovered his mistake. Dashing the gourd to pieces against the ash-hopper, he uttered a sputtering whoop, and began to dance about wildly. This he kept up for a few minutes, coughing and spitting and spluttering, to the no small amazement of his fellow-savages. They surrounded him solemnly, and seemed to have not a suspicion as to what was the matter. The warrior with the fire, forgetting what he had been about to do, hastened to join the group.

No sooner had the lye-drinker, who was very angry, got the lye out of his mouth than he started in to wreak his vengeance on something. First he gave the brass kettle a kick, scattering its contents, and sending the kettle itself rolling twenty yards. Then he tried to push the ash-hopper down, but that was too strongly built. Next he ran to the three big pots of lye, perched on stones, and hurled them over, one after another!

But even that did not appease the warrior's wrath. Snatching up a chunk of fire, he started toward the crib with it. The boys again crouched down, and again Thad covered the door with his rifle. But on the way the Comanche noticed those five bee-hives, and paused to see what damage he could do them.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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They stood on flat stones. The first one he pushed over. But it went so easily that he kicked the others over, one after another, as fast as he could kick.

Thad's father had bought these bees with the farm. But they were really wild bees. The former owner had found them in hollow trees over in the Cross Timbers, and had brought them from there. The worst objection to them was that they were very vicious. In warm weather one could never safely venture near the hives without a smoke. And the weather was very mild just now.

At first the overturned bees seemed paralyzed with astonishment. There was only a loud, angry buzzing. But the buzzing quickly increased to an ominous roar. Then, suddenly, the very air grew dark as the five swarms of furious insects rose up in quest of vengeance.

The warrior with the fire had started on, but he stopped quickly, and began to strike right and left. A few moments later he uttered a sort of yelp, hurled his fire at the bees, and fled for life! His companions were close after him, some of them uttering wild whoops of pain or terror as they ran.

All the Comanches were naked down to their waists, and the outraged, furious bees were quick to take advantage of that fact. While thousands of the insects pursued the dismounted warriors, other thousands swarmed forth in the moonlight and fell upon the mounted warriors and their horses. Bows and arrows and spears were useless now. Away the horses clattered, their savage riders striking out wildly in a vain effort to rid themselves of the painful pests. Whooping

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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and yelping, some of the warriors dashed away up the road and others down the road, the remainder climbing the hill and quickly disappearing over it to the west. In an incredibly short time not an Indian could be seen.

Already the two cowering white boys had largely recovered from their fright. With their eyes to cracks, they were laughing gleefully but noiselessly. And they kept laughing every time they thought of what they had seen. They were still greatly afraid of the savages, however, and half expected that some of the war-party would return. But the Comanches had had enough of that place, and not one of them showed himself there again.

After half an hour or longer, the two boys crept to the door and started to crawl out. But scarcely had Thad thrust his head outside when several angry bees, humming in a high key, came buzzing around him. He dodged back and jerked the little door shut.

"Guess if the red boogers come fooling around here any more, they'll mighty soon skedaddle again," he said, well pleased rather than otherwise to find the insects still eager for revenge.

Another half-hour the boys waited. By this time the bees had gone back into their overturned hives. But they were still buzzing angrily, resentfully.

"What had we better do now, Thad, do you think?"

"Carry word to the fort as quick as ever we can."

"Reckon that's about right. We'll sick the scouts on the sneakin' red varmints."

Cautiously, noiselessly the two opened the door and crawled out of their hiding-place. As they stole by the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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overturned hives, the bees could still be heard grumbling. The moon was now far up the sky, and the boys squatted in the shadow of the ash-hopper till they could look around again, and listen. Soon they rose up and started on; but after climbing over the fence they again dropped to the ground, in its shadow. A little later they were up and tramping the road toward the fort. Thad was in the lead, with the flintlock on his shoulder, while Charley Dick, armed only with the powder-horn and the ammunition-bag, kept treading almost on his heels.

Like two shadows they moved, their bare feet making no noise. Seldom they spoke, and then only in whispers. Sometimes they paused to listen. Once the noise of hoofs made them drop down in the tall grass by the road-side. But it was only some cattle crossing the road. Their fears relieved, the boys rose up and moved silently on.

Coming to the creek, they waded across, and were glad of the shadow of the big pecan-trees which darkened the road for more than a hundred yards beyond. On down the valley the noiseless figures glided. Soon they could see dimly, off to their right, the fences and a corn-crib belonging to Uncle Johnny McDaniel's little farm. The place was deserted, the owner and his family having sought the safety of the fort several weeks before.

On the two alert boys moved, eyes and ears open, and every nerve strained to catch the first intimation of danger. Another mile, and they were greatly relieved to see the moon shining on the roof of Parson Witt's

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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house. People lived here, and some wakeful dogs ran out to bark. But the boys hurried on, and had soon passed the remaining half-mile.

More dogs barked at them, in friendly greeting, as they entered the fort's moonlit square. Both their fathers being off scouting, Thad and Charley Dick did not go home, but struck across to the east side, where lived the captain of the scouts. On Captain Graham's clapboard door they pounded noisily. The captain had ridden away with the scouts, but had been expected to return when the relieved squad came home.

Presently the shutter swung outward, and Valentine, the captain's grown son, appeared in the doorway.

"Has your pap come in yit, Val?" inquired Charley Dick. He knew the family better than Thad did.

"Yes, he's here—in bed. What do you want with 'im, boys?"

"We've just run afoul of some—some redskins, and we thought maybe we'd better come down and bring 'im word," Thad explained.

"Yes, that's right—you did right." Then the young man turned and called back into the room: "Pa, you're wanted out here!"

The puncheon-floor creaked somewhere back in the dark, and a bearded figure, clad only in shirt and drawers, framed itself in the doorway.

"What's up, boys?"

"Redskins close by—a whole gang of 'em, cap'n!" exclaimed Charley Dick.

Eagerly, excitedly the two boys told their story.

"What course did they take from your house,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Thad?" the captain of the scouts inquired, as soon as the breathless narrative was ended.

"Every course, nearly," answered Thad, laughing at the recollection. "But most of 'em went tearing off over the hill to the west, I'd say. They must have got together over there somewhere."

"Anyhow, we didn't see hair nor hide of arry one of the boogers ag'in," put in Charley Dick.

"All right, boys. I'm glad you footed it down here to tell me. We'll be after the sly rascals by the time you can make out a horse-track."

Having done all they could do, the two boys now separated, crossing the square to their homes. Thad went in quietly, but his mother awoke, and he had to explain his coming by narrating the night's experiences. Before he had finished, voices could be heard all around the square. Val Graham had been passing from house to house, calling out the men, and ordering them to saddle and arm and be ready to ride.

Soon Mrs. Wilkins came to the door, and Thad had to relate his experiences again. There was still an hour or two till daylight; and when the woman had returned home, and the general excitement had subsided, the boy lay down on the edge of the trundle-bed, by the children, and quickly fell asleep.

Later he was partly awakened by the trampling of numerous hoofs. The captain and his little band of pursuers were now riding away. When Thad awoke again, the sun was shining. His mother was up, and already had a fire burning in the fireplace, and the breakfast biscuits in the skillet to bake.

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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Thad was quickly out of bed. He had slept with his clothes on. Now he took the bucket from the water-shelf and started for the spring.

Marzee stopped him as he was passing her door. She was outside, sweeping the trampled front yard with a broom made of bushes tied together.

“Oh, Thad, tell me all about it, won’t you?” she begged.

Modestly but not unwillingly the boy narrated once more the night’s adventures. Marzee listened so eagerly that Thad was almost sorry he had not killed a few Indians, so as to make himself a hero in her eyes. But, though he had done nothing save to hide in a corn-crib and aim his rifle at a Comanche, he was pleased to notice that the girl seemed to think even that heroic. She gazed at him with unmistakable admiration; and she laughed, as did everybody else, when he told how the outraged honey-makers had put the half-naked scalp-takers to flight.

“Oh, I do wish I could have seen that—without being there!” the girl exclaimed. “If I’d been there, I’d have been scared half out of my senses, I just know.”

“Well, Charley Dick and I were scared too—scared into cold shivers I was.”

On the path to the spring Thad met several boys and a woman or two, returning with buckets of water; and more than once, coming and going, he had to stop and relate what had happened during the past night. And when he got back to the square, Marzee had thought of several other questions to ask him.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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After breakfast, and during the rest of the day, there were numerous visitors at the Dayberry cabin—most of them women who wanted to hear all the details of Thad's story. He was kept busy telling it again and again. Charley Dick, at his home, was having a similar experience. Everybody in the fort was talking and laughing over the story of the Indians routed and put to inglorious flight by bees.

Night came, and Captain Graham's party had not returned. And the next day at noon they were still absent. This meant that they had struck the red raiders' trail and were off in hot pursuit.

After dinner this second day Thad thought he ought to go up to the farm again, and his mother agreed with him. Frontier people soon forgot their perils. With a party of scouts on the Indians' trail, there was no present danger from that band; and there was little likelihood that another band would be raiding the Blocker Creek country so soon again.

Charley Dick had work to do at home, and Thad, his rifle on his shoulder, was about to start off alone. But his mother, leaving the younger children in the care of Alice, Thad's nine-year-old sister, went with him. They walked.

At the farm they found the ash-hopper still dripping lye. The brass kettle was where the lye-drinking warrior had kicked it, and the pieces of the shattered gourd were scattered around. The overturned pots were lying, one on its side and the others bottom up. Those hollow-log bee-"gums" were also prostrate on the ground, in various positions. But every bee was

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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gone. All that remained in the hives was some empty honeycomb, fast to the cross-sticks.

"They've moved back to the woods, where they were brought from," Mrs. Dayberry remarked.

"Yes, they must have. Wish now I'd tried to set the gums up. Maybe the bees would have staid in 'em. No honey for us next fall." Thad sighed. He dearly loved honey.

"It's well you didn't try, Thaddy boy. You might have got stung to death," his mother said.

Thad righted the overturned pots, then went to carrying water for the ash-hopper. When enough had been poured on, he gathered up all the fresh eggs in his cap. Now they put the brass kettle under the lower end of the hopper-trough, and returned to the fort.

When the two entered the square, they saw that Captain Graham and his band of pursuers had just come home. All were unsaddling and disarming, every man at his own door.

The scouts reported having pursued the savage war-party many miles. They had overtaken them and had a skirmish with them, and thought they had wounded more than one. All the Indians had escaped, but only by abandoning the little drove of stolen horses they were driving.

Next morning Thad armed himself and tramped back up to the farm, accompanied by Charley Dick Sheegog. They staid all day, all night and another day, running four big pots of lye before they returned. Then Thad and his mother drove up in the ox-wagon, taking a small barrel with numerous bacon-rinds, fat-

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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meat trimmings and similar stuff in it, to be used for soap-grease. Every night they returned to the fort; but three days they spent running lye, boiling down lye, adding grease, and stirring and skimming. When at last their task was ended, they drove back to the fort with half a barrel of soft soap in the wagon, and about a gallon of potash—obtained by boiling down lye—in one of their big pots.

For several days the weather had been mild, almost warm. But next morning after the last of the soap-making a fierce norther was sweeping the country. Soon after breakfast, while the Dayberrys were sitting before a roaring fire, there was a knock at the front door. In response to Thad's "Come on in!" Charley Dick Sheegop pulled the latch-string and entered.

"Goin' to have plenty of nice, light biscuits, you folks air, I see," the visitor remarked, as he seated himself in a rawhide-bottomed chair before the fireplace.

He was alluding to their potash, which, spread on a flat stone, was baking before the fire, almost under the fore-stick. When thoroughly burned it would be used in making bread. It was thus that these pioneers obtained their soda. Saleratus it was sometimes called.

"Maybe they'll be fairly light. Hard to make nice bread without sour milk," Mrs. Dayberry answered.

Soon Charley Dick said: "Cold enough now to save pork. Pa wanted to kill a hog the first cold spell. But he's out on the scout, and it may be warm by the time he comes back. We're mighty nigh clean out of meat at our house. And ma she 'lowed as you've got a gun, Thad, maybe you'd go with me, and we'd kill a hog."

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## HONEY-MAKERS AGAINST SCALP-TAKERS

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“Why, yes, I’ll go, Charley Dick. Of course I will! Didn’t you help me run lye? That’ll be all right, won’t it, ma?”

“I guess so, if you boys will be cautious and not let the Comanches surprise you. Where is your hog, Charley Dick?”

“Over in the Cross Timbers, Mis’ Dayberry. That’s where everybody’s hogs uses, most of ’em. Sandy land over there.”

“How can you go? All our horses are out on the range. Thad hasn’t a hoof to ride.”

“Oh, that’s no matter. I’ve got one of pa’s horses lariatied out down on the branch. Old Bob’s as gentle as a work-steer. He carries double, too. We can both ride him.”

“But you’ll have to take a wagon to haul your meat home, won’t you?”

“No, mum. We couldn’t git about well over there with a wagon. If we can only kill a hog, we’ll come home a-kitin’ with it. Won’t be the first hog old Bob has snaked out of the woods.”

“When had we better start?” Thad wanted to know.

“Right away—the sooner the better. May take us ever so long to find a hog that’ll fry hisself.” Charley Dick sprang up and started toward the door. “You git ready, Thad. I’ll be over here with the horse a few minutes from now.”



## V

### TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

IN due time Charley Dick came riding back. He stopped by a big log at the woodpile. Thad now threw open the door and stepped out, rifle in hand, and wearing the usual powder-horn and ammunition-bag.

“Couldn’t you borrow a saddle, Charley Dick?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t try. Pap’s ridin’ his’n. Whichever one of us rides behind will have to take it bareback anyhow, and the other can do the same. Old Bob’s back’s not so very sharp. Come ahead and bounce up!”

Thad stepped upon the log, and was quickly astraddle of the black horse behind Charley Dick. His rifle he rested across the horse’s back between them. As they were starting, Mrs. Dayberry appeared in her door to call warningly:

“Now you boys watch out every minute for red men! Your scalps are always in danger, recollect!”

“Risk us to keep our eyes open, mum!” Charley Dick shouted back, reassuringly.

Crossing the creek at the road above the spring, the two boys followed up the wooded ravine beyond till they came to the high prairie ridge. Now they left the road and struck across the country toward the northwest.

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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Up here the norther swept furiously, forcing them to button their homespun coats closely around them, and to turn up their collars. Very glad were they when at last, after facing that north wind for two or three miles, they found themselves in the shelter of the Cross Timbers.

Here they rode first in one direction and then in another, among the post-oaks and black-jacks. The timber was not very large. In most places it was more or less open, and there blue-stem grass grew as thick and as tall as it did out on the prairie.

Several times the two hog-hunters caught glimpses of hogs, but the wild animals were always running so fast that there was no chance of getting close enough for a shot, much less to see how the hogs were "marked"—in what shapes their ears were cut. Finally, after an hour or two, the riders grew so cold that they dismounted to walk. Now Charley Dick led the horse, and Thad went ahead with the rifle.

"Next hog you ketch sight of that's toler'ble fat, drop 'im if you can," Charley Dick soon said. "Never mind the mark."

"I won't do any such thing!" Thad's tones sounded indignant. "Think I'm going to shoot some other man's hog and get myself into trouble? I'm not overly smart, but I'm no such greenhorn as that! Nosirree!"

"Oh, don't fret about the trouble!" answered the boy with the horse, lightly. "As soon as we kill the brute and see his years, we'll know whose he is. Then we'll send the owner word we've butchered one of his hogs, and he can feel free to butcher one of pap's. A

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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hog's a hog. That's how we work the thing around here."

"Oh, is it? I'd never heard of that way. But of course if that's how everybody does, it's all right. Does save lots of trouble, I guess. So down goes the first hog I see that looks fat enough to grease the pan!"

The two hunters moved on, making as little noise as possible. The forest was not yet in full leaf, and, excepting where bushes grew, they could see a good distance ahead.

"You'd better let me keep a right smart piece in the lead," Thad soon called back. "I don't make as much racket as old Bob does. Keep your eye on me, and when you see me motion, stop in your tracks and stand stock-still."

"That's what I'll do." Charley Dick walked slowly, to let the boy with the rifle get farther ahead.

Half an hour longer the two meat-hunters wound and wandered about in the forest. But at last Thad turned and motioned frantically to the boy with the horse to halt. Thad had not caught sight of any hogs as yet, but he could plainly hear them grunting. There were bushes between him and them.

Cocking his rifle, he crouched low and began to steal toward the grunting. At length he reached a point where, peeping through the brush, he could see one of the hogs.

"Do to boil with greens, that fellow would; but I'd like one that will make some gravy," he said to himself, while moving noiselessly to one side.

Soon he had another hog in plain view. This animal,

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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though not fat, appeared to carry more flesh, and the boy dropped to one knee. Raising his rifle, he rested his elbow on the other knee and took careful aim.

But before he was ready to fire, the hog, which was busy rooting, turned till its head was behind its body. The head was Thad's target, and he had to wait till the brute turned farther. When at length the head was exposed again, the boy sighted long and carefully, then pressed the trigger.

First came a flash and a puff of smoke, which would have spoiled the aim of anybody unaccustomed to shooting a flintlock gun. Then the rifle cracked sharply.

With many loud woo-woos twenty or thirty wild hogs went tearing and crashing away through the brush, making more noise than the same number of wild steers would have made! But the hog Thad had aimed at did not run. When the boy rushed forward, he found that one lying on the ground, squealing and kicking.

"Whoopee!" shouted the young hunter, in tones of unmistakable triumph.

Now Charley Dick came forward, as fast as he could lead the horse. He was carrying a butcher-knife in a sheath, belted round him; and with this they stuck the hog in the throat, to let it bleed.

"Knocked 'im cold the first pop, didn't you?" remarked Charley Dick, as the two stood over the now motionless animal.

"Give me as good a chance as I had that time, and I can knock 'em cold every pop," answered Thad, with some pride. "But guess I'd better load up again, first thing," he added, with frontier caution, as he took a

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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charger out of his ammunition-bag and began to fill it from the powder-horn.

“Thad, I’m chilled through and through. Let’s kindle a fire before you load your gun.”

“A fire it is, then.”

Thad primed his rifle, and flashed the priming against some lint-cotton. They soon had a good fire blazing up.

While Charley Dick was clearing away the leaves and grass to keep the fire from spreading, Thad re-loaded his rifle. Later he leaned the gun against a black-jack, and for a good while the two merely stood and soaked themselves in the warmth.

At length they began to prepare the hog for the trip homeward. With the butcher-knife they opened the carcass and, taking out the entrails, threw them away. That was to lighten the hog. They also cut out a good-sized chunk of the liver and laid it on the grass. Then with a darning-needle and some cotton twine they sewed up the opening. That was to keep dust and trash out of the hollow hog.

“Now for a little snack to stay our stomachs!” cried Charley Dick.

“That’s the thing! From the way I feel inside, it must be long past meal-time,” Thad remarked.

They had soon cut sticks and were sitting by the fire, broiling liberal-sized slices of the hog’s liver. The smell of the broiling meat sharpened their already keen appetites. As soon as the liver was cooked, the broilers began to eat. Bob, the horse, was grazing around the fire.

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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Black clouds were overhead, and the north wind was making a great to-do up among the tree-tops. But the fire was delightfully warm, and the wind was seldom felt down here.

“When my new rifle comes—” Charley Dick began.

“How soon do you expect to get it?” Thad broke in.

“That I don’t know. I hain’t never heard anybody say just how long it takes a shootin’ star to fetch what you wish fur. But I’m hopin’ it won’t be long now. I need that gun as bad as a feller can. I could do dead oodles of things with it that I cain’t begin to do without it. And it ain’t half-way safe to be goin’ around unarmed in this redskinny country.”

“What kind of a gun do you s’pose it’ll be?” ventured Thad.

“Of course I don’t know as to that—won’t know till I see it. I ruther reckon it’ll be a good one. That was the kind I wished fur.”

“And how do you guess it’ll come?”

“Not a bit of tellin’, Thad. Maybe I’ll be goin’ some’r’s and run acrosst it. Like as not it’ll be layin’ in the grass or in the bresh; or maybe right out in the road.”

“But how—how will it come there—where you’ll find it?” persisted Thad.

“Now how do I know that?” exclaimed Charley Dick, with some impatience. “Guess maybe somebody had hid it there, and then went off and forgot it. Only way I can think of.”

“I’ve never yet heard tell of any fellow that hid his gun and then went off and forgot it. They don’t hide

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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'em, for one thing. They carry 'em along with 'em to shoot with. And even if they did hide 'em, they'd mighty soon hurry back and snake 'em out."

"Oh, shucks! I don't care a straw how it got there—that gun! But I'm just nacherly bound to find it some'r's. If I didn't, there wouldn't be anything in that shootin'-star business."

"Maybe there's not anything in it," suggested Thad.

But at the mere mention of losing that much-coveted, long-coveted rifle, Charley Dick flared up angrily:

"Not anything in it! Then what makes folks say there is—folks that knows more in a minute than me and you know in a lifetime, Thad Dayberry?" he demanded, resentfully, almost scornfully.

"Of course there may be a little in it," conceded Thad. "I'm not saying but what there is. But—"

"Then what you tryin' to make out like there ain't fur?" demanded he of the shooting star, with a grievance in his tones.

"But there may not be enough in it to fetch a rifle every time you wish for a rifle," completed the other boy.

"That's all you know about it, Thad Dayberry!" retorted Charley Dick, angrily.

Seeing that he had ruffled his new friend's feelings, Thad, with more discretion than some older people would have shown, said nothing more. For several minutes there was silence, as the two boys gnawed away at their broiled liver. At length the silence became oppressive.

"Guess maybe I'll make a wish too, first time I see

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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a star shoot," ventured the offender, by way of concession.

"Will you, Thad?" All of Charley Dick's resentment was gone instantly. "What's your wish goin' to be?"

"That's something I'm never to breathe to a living soul."

"Not even to me, after I've told you things?"

"Maybe I'll tell you some time, when it comes to pass."

"But why not now, Thad? If we're to be good friends, we'll have to tell each other things. Ain't that so?"

"Guess maybe it is. But what I'm going to wish for I won't tell anybody."

"Is it a great secret?"

Thad nodded. "That's what it is."

"Then I don't see why you won't tell me," grumbled Charley Dick. Curiosity was devouring him.

"Well, I don't know. Reckon maybe I might tell you if you'd promise never, never, never to tell."

"Oh, I'll keep it dark, Thad. What you afeared of me tellin' fur?"

"Hope a wild horse will throw you if you tell?"

"Yeh. Hope a wild horse will throw me if I tell."

"Hope a tarantula will bite you if you tell?"

Charley Dick nodded. "Hope a tranchler will bite me."

"Hope a centipede will sting you if you tell?"

"Hope a santypede will sting me."

"Hope a Comanche will shoot at you?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Uh huh. Hope a Comanche will shoot at me.”

“Hope a co’gar will gnaw your bones if you tell?”

But at this Charley Dick flared up resentfully: “Now looky here, Thad Dayberry, that’s just a little too much! I’ve already been pitched off by a wild horse, and bit by a tranchler, and stung by a santypede, and—and shot at by a redskin. But doggone it all, I’m not goin’ to be et up by no co’gar—not if I can help myself!”

“All right, then. No co’gar no secret.” Thad turned his back to the fire and stood gazing up into a tree-top.

Charley Dick spoke not a word for a whole minute. But curiosity, sharper than a cougar’s tooth, was biting him.

“Thad, is that co’gar the last?”

The other boy nodded.

“All right, then. Hope a co’gar will gnaw my bones!” Charley Dick blurted out, desperately. “Now what is it—that wish?” he demanded, with ill-suppressed eagerness.

Thad turned. “Well, what I’m going to wish is that—that— Oh, I don’t like to tell!” His face had reddened, and he seemed greatly embarrassed.

“Not even after I’ve been throwed by a horse, and bit by a tranchler, and stung by a santypede, and shot by a Comanch’, and et body-aciously up by a co’gar?” demanded Charley Dick, reproachfully.

“Oh well, then, if I must! What I’m going to wish is that—that Marzee Wilkins will—will like me better than anybody else,” stammered Thad.

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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“But Marzee is Buck Thompson’s girl.”

“Who said so?”

“Why, Buck says so.”

“But did you ever hear Marzee say that?”

“No. She wouldn’t say such a thing. She’s kind of—shy, you know. But she likes Buck. A blind person could see that.”

“I know she does. And that’s just why I’m going to wish. I want her to like me best.”

“Thad, I doubt mightily if a shootin’ star will fetch that.”

“Why not? If it’ll put a new rifle where you can find it, why won’t it make a girl like me?”

“Well, I don’t know for shore, of course. Maybe it will—no tellin’. Anyhow, if you like Marzee it’s worth tryin’.”

“That’s what I think, Charley Dick. But we’d better be off. Take us a good while to ride home.”

The dead hog was now lying on its back. A rope was taken from the horse’s neck, and one end was tied securely around one of the hog’s hind legs, and the other around the other. Then the horse’s tail, which was abundant, was knotted in a big knot, and a slipping noose of the rope passed over the knot and drawn tight.

“Reckon Bob won’t kick, or kick up?” questioned Thad, a trifle anxiously.

“Naw!” was the scornful reply. “This ain’t the first mess of pork old Bob has tailed out of the woods.”

Charley Dick now climbed upon the horse, but Thad tramped along behind to see that the hog dragged as it should. At length the mounted boy stopped by a log.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Thad, I’ll let you ride before if you’ll let me pack your rifle.”

Thad agreed, and Charley Dick took the gun and slid back, so that Thad could mount in front of him.

“Keep on the grass—be shore to keep on the grass,” cautioned the boy behind. “It’s dry now, and as slick as a body can ask fur. But if you git on the bare ground, or on rocks or gravel, it’ll be death on Bob’s tail.”

“Reckon I don’t know all about that? Think I’ve never dragged anything before?” demanded Thad, impatiently.

Away the two hog-hunters went, following the open places as much as possible. Often they glanced behind, but only to see that the hog was dragging on its back as well as could be desired.

A ride of a mile or more brought them to the edge of the timber. They now followed a wooded branch, which headed far out in the prairie. The branch led them east, while their true course was southeast. But being down between hills, and at the south edge of the strip of woods, they were sheltered from that chilling north wind.

“This way beats a wagon all holler—don’t you think, so, Thad?”

“Yes, it does. We got around through the woods better; and out here we don’t have to bother about a road. Fact is, we can travel better out of a road than in one. I’m going to hug this branch as long as I can. Be mighty chilly when we strike the high ridge. That wind—”

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## TO THE CROSS TIMBERS FOR PORK

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Just at this point Thad felt the boy behind suddenly clutch him hard. Turning his head to the right, he saw nothing.

“Looky yander, Thad! Just looky yander!” whispered Charley Dick, with no little agitation.

Glancing in the opposite direction, and across the branch, Thad saw four mounted Indians coming down the high, steep hill beyond! And scarcely did the savages see themselves discovered when they began to yell!

“They’re after us—they’re right after us!” Charley Dick almost shrieked. And at the same time he fell to belaboring the horse with a dogwood switch he was carrying. Thad, little less excited, was quickly digging his heels into the animal’s sides.

Ordinarily Bob, gentle old wagon-horse and plow-horse that he was, would have been both slow and hard to get into rapid motion. But those blood-curdling yells, and the frantic terror of his young riders, stampeded him instantly. Away he bounded, at the top of his clumsy speed! Both boys were using their heels, and Charley Dick was still plying the dogwood frantically.

“Wish—wish—wish that hog was loose!” gasped Charley Dick, after a glance behind.

“No chance—for that now!” Thad kept urging the horse to increased speed. “Hope the red boogers—can’t overhaul us! All up—with us—if they do!”

Away clattered the frightened nag, with the two more frightened boys clinging to his back, and the dead hog bouncing and bounding along at his tail! Abandon-

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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ing the branch, Thad now headed the horse up the slope and straight toward Fort Blocker. Bob, faithful old fellow, was already doing his best; but not for a moment did his excited, terrified riders cease to urge him on.



## VI

### WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

THE fugitives had a good start. Not only were they a few hundred yards ahead, but between them and their enemies was that wooded branch, not easy to cross in most places. Old Bob could run pretty well when he got under full swing. But with his triple load, two boys on his back and a dragging hog at his tail, he would soon be overtaken in an equal race.

Running up the steep hill-side was both slow and hard. When at length the fugitives found themselves on nearly level ground, their horse was breathing heavily. But he soon got his wind when he ceased to climb.

“Can you see ’em, Charley Dick? Are they—still coming?”

The boy behind glanced back. “Yes, they’re right after us, Thad! Comin’ as hard as—as they can tear! One’s already—acrosst the branch! They’ll ketch us—I just know—to my soul—they’ll ketch us!”

“Maybe not—maybe not! Fort not so—so very far off—now! Bound to get there, we are, or break our—our necks trying!”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“But what if—if they—if they overhaul us, Thad?”

“Then it’s down into a—a gully for us! And there we’ll have it—out with ’em!”

“Dog-gone that—that shootin’ star! Why hain’t it brought—that gun of mine along—before now—the slow-poky thing! With two guns—we’d have—some show!”

“We’ll have some—some show with—with one! Grandpa did!”

Charley Dick now glanced back again, but their savage pursuers had not yet reached the top of the hill. On sped the two fugitives across the prairie, in their wild ride for life! Though puffing and blowing, the faithful old plow-horse was straining every nerve to get himself and his young riders to safety. And hard as he ran, that hog at his tail traveled just as fast as he did.

At length the fugitives had crossed the highest part of the ridge and were where the prairie sloped gradually toward Blocker. As they started down this slope, Charley Dick looked back and saw the Comanches, still a few hundred yards behind, but coming furiously. Already some of them were letting fly their arrows.

On clattered the black horse at his best pace! Holding the straightest course to the fort, Thad was guiding him both across and down the ridge. At length they were where they could look over into the Blocker Creek valley. Before long the fort itself would be in sight. Now, just as the fugitives were beginning to feel that death was not so near, and might be escaped altogether, loud yells broke out not far away!

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## WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

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“They’re gainin’—on us! Just bound to—to have us, whether or no!” groaned Charley Dick, plying what was left of the dogwood, but still too terrified to look behind.

Thad cast one frightened glance over his shoulder, and caught a glimpse of numerous horsemen, off to the southwest.

“Go it, Bob! That’s a horse!” he urged. “Don’t let ’em catch us! Show ’em what a race-horse you are!”

Soon burst out another chorus of yells, followed by loud, hilarious laughter.

“Laughin’ to—to think they’ve—got us!” gasped Charley Dick.

But Thad, terrified though he was, detected something familiar in that laughter. Again he glanced over his shoulder. Now he noticed that the horsemen were not behind, but off to the southwest, where they had just emerged from a deep prairie ravine.

“Hey! Hold up there, boys! Don’t break your fool necks runnin’!” one of the horsemen now yelled.

“It’s white men!” cried Thad, in wonderful relief. He began to pull on the bridle-rein.

“Keep ridin’, Thad! They may just be—be foolin’ of us!” urged the excited Charley Dick.

But now such a medley of yells and shrieks of laughter burst out as could not be mistaken. So fast was Bob running that he ran nearly two hundred yards farther before Thad could check him.

“Why, it’s the scouts—it’s our own scouts coming home!” the boy in front exclaimed, after turning the puffing horse till they could see the party.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Shore ’nough! Just who it is! Never was so glad to set eyes on anybody in all the days of my life!” declared Charley Dick.

Now they looked back the way they had come, but the pursuing savages were not to be seen.

When the party of twelve or fifteen scouts came up with Thad and Charley Dick, all were still laughing heartily, gaily. The spectacle of two wildly fleeing boys with a dead hog at their horse’s tail, was ludicrous enough to make anybody laugh.

“What’s the matter, boys? The black running away with you?” inquired Captain Graham.

“Wasn’t runnin’ half as fast as we wanted ’im to, Bob wasn’t,” answered Charley Dick. “Redskins about to ketch us!”

“Redskins! Where?” the captain demanded. All gazed back the way the two fugitives had come.

“We saw ’em! We both saw ’em—saw ’em as plain as the nose on your face!” insisted Charley Dick. For some of the scouts seemed a little incredulous.

“That we did—we certainly did!” declared Thad.

“Boys, it must have been us you was runnin’ from,” spoke up Mr. Wilkins.

“Think we don’t know redskins from white folks?” Charley Dick demanded, resentfully.

Now Thad spoke again: “We saw four Indians, over yonder on that branch.” He was pointing west of north. “And they started right after us—took after us as hard as they could clatter.”

“That’s what they did,” declared the boy behind. “I looked back and saw ’em ag’in just as we got to the

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## WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

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top of the hill, and then twice more while we's a-whoopin' it acrosst the prairie. Last time was just after we'd crossed the divide. By then they was shootin' at us. One arr' whisked by right over our heads."

"It did," agreed Thad. "I saw it strike the ground beyond us."

"Boys, what kind of hats did the Indians you saw have on?" inquired one of the scouts, Jess Holloway by name.

Charley Dick laughed scornfully. Suddenly he jerked off his cap and held it down against the horse's side.

"Very same kind I've got on this minute," he answered.

"Couldn't well have been us that scared 'em, boys," another scout, Bill Cogburn, now spoke up. "We've been comin' more from the southwest."

"Are you lads right certain it wasn't just four cowboys that stampeded you?" asked Mr. Sheegog.

"Oddest-lookin' cowboys I ever clapped eyes on, then, pap," Charley Dick answered.

"If you'd heard the boogers screech and yell, you wouldn't have thought cowboys," Thad remarked. "And why should cowboys be shooting arrows at us?"

"Guess there's not much doubt about it. These two lads have just been chased by Indians," the captain now said. "Mighty impudent of the red rascals to venture so close to the fort in broad daylight. But they've done it—done that very thing."

"Captain, hadn't some of us better take a little

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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gallop over that way and see what we can see?" asked Lieutenant Reel.

"Rather guess we had, George. You go, for one. All you fellows whose horses are not too tired better go with George."

Seven men volunteered, and the lieutenant and his party were off at once. Captain Graham and Charley Dick's father, and also Mr. Wilkins, were among those who rode on to the fort. The two boys went with them, but had to ride some distance behind, because several of the scouts' horses kept snorting, and seemed not a little afraid of that trailing hog.

When Thad and Charley Dick entered the square, Mr. Wilkins had dismounted and was unsaddling at his own door. Marzee and Florence had run out to meet him, and their mother was standing in the doorway.

"Oh, but you two boys do look so funny, with that hog dragging at your horse's tail!" laughed Marzee.

Charley Dick frowned at her. "Looky here, gal, didn't you ever see a nag come tailin' a hog home before?" he demanded.

Now Mr. Wilkins spoke up: "Marzee, if you'd seen them two lads tearin' acrosst the prairie, with that brute caperin' and friskin' along at Bob's heels, you'd have laughed yourself dizzy."

"Guess we must have looked a little funny just about that time," admitted Thad, with a grin.

"But we didn't feel funny—narry bit," declared Charley Dick, so solemnly that all the others laughed.

"What made you run—you boys?" Marzee wanted to know.

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## WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

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“Best reason in the world—redskins,” Thad told her.

“Yes, redskins it was,” said Charley Dick. “And if old Bob hadn’t scratched dirt like a good feller, they’d have been packin’ off our skyelps by now.”

After narrating briefly the story of that race for life, the boys rode on across the square to Mr. Sheegog’s, still dragging their woods pork. When they had untied the hog, and lariatied their horse out on the grass, they came back. Now Mr. Sheegog and they made a fire behind the house, where they heated water in a big pot, and scalded the hog and scraped it. When Thad went home, he was carrying a ham, and Charley Dick went with him to carry some ribs and part of the backbone. The Dayberrys had fresh pork for supper that night, and so did the Wilkineses; for Thad had divided his share with them.

Mr. Dayberry had not returned with the homecoming squad of scouts. He was due to return, but had remained out to take the place of Hardin Witt, who had scouted in Dayberry’s stead during the corn-planting season.

After washing the supper-dishes, and putting them away on the shelf, Mrs. Dayberry started her wheel. While she was spinning busily, the younger children, on the puncheons before the fire, were amusing themselves with such games as “William a Trimbletoe” and “Club-fist.” But Thad was sitting by the table, with a lighted candle at his elbow and a book in his hand. It was *The Life of Francis Marion* that he was reading. He had read the book two or three times already; for

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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that dashing free-lance of the American Revolution was a man after this frontier boy's own heart.

But just now, in the midst of an exciting pursuit of the British and Tories, the trampling of hoofs and the barking of dogs announced that horsemen were entering the fort. Putting down his book, the boy sprang up and hurried out. He was wondering whether Lieutenant Reel's scouts had arrived, or some of Captain Totty's State troops were returning to headquarters.

The horsemen, he could make out, were riding straight toward Captain Graham's house. Now he knew who they were, and hurried over there.

"Yes, it was Indians that Thad and Charley Dick got scared at—sure-enough Indians, Captain," Lieutenant Reel was reporting. "We didn't find the boogers where the boys saw 'em, but we rode on a good piece and caught sight of 'em just as night was coming on. We counted four, exactly as the boys said."

"How close did you get to the bunch, George?"

"Something less than half a mile, I'd say. But we could make certain of their being Indian warriors."

"Did you follow 'em?"

"Yes. That is, we started to follow. But before we'd gone a mile it got so dark we lost 'em. Then we turned back."

"That was all you could do, I guess. But we must strike out on their trail early to-morrow morning, and see if we can't run the boogers down," the captain said.

After a few minutes' conversation the men dispersed to their homes, and Thad hurried over to Mr. Sheegog's to tell Charley Dick. From there the two boys went to

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## WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

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Thad's home, and then on to the next house, to let Mr. Wilkins know what the scouts had reported. They didn't want the family, and especially Marzee, to suspect that they had taken fright at nothing.

"So Reel's party ackshally saw the red varmints, did they?" Mr. Wilkins remarked. "Some of our men 'lowed you two must have been mistaken; but this proves that they was mistaken. I don't blame you for ridin' a blue streak to save your bacon."

"You mean to save their pork, don't you, pa?" spoke up Marzee. "Who ever heard of a hog just killed being called bacon?"

Mr. Wilkins laughed good-naturedly. "That wasn't the meat you wanted to save worst, was it, boys—that hog?"

"No, it wasn't." Thad grinned. "Our own 'bacon' was in danger. We'd have been only too glad to cut loose from that pork."

"Wouldn't we, though?" exclaimed Charley Dick. "I had my butcher-knife, but I couldn't reach the rope with it. And of course I couldn't slash off old Bob's tail. So we had to do the best we could, hog and all."

In honor of Mr. Wilkins's home-coming, the family were parching popcorn and cracking pecans. After telling their news, the boys were made to sit down and join in the feasting.

"Are your folks expecting to drive up any cows before long?" Mrs. Wilkins inquired, in the course of the conversation.

Thad answered: "Yes, we are. We always do. Ma was just speaking of that to-night, at the supper-table."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Our cow-pen hasn't been hauled down yet; but I'm going to yoke up in the morning and go to hauling it."

The hour was rather late when the two boys started home.

"If pap hain't got somethin' or other for me to work at, guess maybe I could help you with that rail-haulin'," Charley Dick proposed, when they were out in the square.

"Why, of course, if you will. I'll be the gladdest kind to have you," Thad assured him.

The next morning was still pretty cool; but the wind had ceased to blow and the sun was shining. Not long after sunrise the two boys drove away up the creek. Several scouts had ridden out at daybreak in quest of the four Indians, and there was not supposed to be any danger from that source. But both boys were armed, Thad carrying his rifle, as usual, and Charley Dick having his father's big six-shooter belted to him.

In due time the two came driving back with a wagon-load of rails. And they kept hauling till the cow-pen up at the farm had been removed to the fort. There Thad built it up again, thirty or forty yards back of their house, and in the edge of the woods.

By this time the scouts had returned home, without even a glimpse of an Indian. A week afterwards another party of scouts rode out to the scouting-line, and two days later the relieved men came home, Thad's father among them.

Next morning after Mr. Dayberry's return, he and Thad drove up to the farm to work. And so they kept

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## WHEN THE SCOUTS COME HOME

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doing day after day, returning to the fort every night. First they finished clearing several acres of land, grubbing up the bushes on it and burning them. Later they took the oxen and a turning-plow and turned over the new ground. After tearing the sod to pieces by dragging a tree-top over it—the frontier substitute for a harrow—they went to planting it in sorghum cane, for molasses. Sorghum always did best on new ground.

Early one morning, just as the sun was rising, Mrs. Dayberry called her husband to the east door and pointed to the east and northeast.

“Silas, do you see that?”

“See what, ma?”

“Why, how green those hills are getting. The range must be pretty good by this time; and the fresh cows are giving plenty of milk. With all these children, we’re needing milk and butter here. You and Thaddy had better hustle out and drive home some cows and calves for that pen Thaddy has been building.”

“All right, ma,” agreed the man. “Just as soon as we git through plantin’ that soggum. Only take us a day or two more. We ought to be done by to-morr’ night at the very latest. Then we’ll turn our whole attention to the milk-business. Thad will have to ketch that young nag of his and gentle ’im a little. That he can do the first time our horses come home for salt. Yessiree! We’ll mighty soon have that new pen just swarmin’ with cows and calves—won’t we, Thad?”

“Guess we will, pa. I’m ready to strike out cow-hunting whenever you are.”



## VII

### THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

DURING the next several days Mr. Dayberry and Thad were pretty busy. Every morning, except once when it was drizzling, they drove up to the farm to work. Even before the sorghum-planting was ended, their corn was calling for the plow and the hoe. But the increasing greenness of the prairies, and the many cows wandering about with young calves, kept reminding them that they must soon attend to the matter of providing the family with milk during the warm season. And even if they had been disposed to forget, Mrs. Dayberry had no intention of letting them.

“Now look here, Silas, how much longer are you going to put that cow-hunting off?” she demanded one morning, a trifle impatiently. “Half the people in the fort have already got their pens built and cows and calves in them. The Beards have cows, and the Andersons have cows, and the Welborns have cows. Captain Totty’s folks have cows, and Jack Totty’s folks have cows, and the Hendrickses have cows. The Henry Millers have cows, and the Henderson Millers have cows, and—and goodness knows how many others. With all these young ones running around here, I don’t see a

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## THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

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bit of sense in our being the last to get milk. If you wait till everybody else has gone out on the range and had their pick, all the best and gentlest milkers will be taken.”

“No great danger of that, I guess, ma.” Her husband laughed good-naturedly. “If there’s anything on the top side of creation that this neck of the woods has got plenty of and to spare, it’s cow-brutes. Wisht some other things was just as plenty. Money, for instance. Every family can have a hundred cows if they feel like milkin’ that many.”

“Well, we don’t care for any hundred—not yet awhile. But we do need three or four—or five. And we don’t want to wait all summer for ’em, either!”

“All right, ma. You won’t have to wait all summer. As soon as our horses come home, and Thad can git a rope on that young nag of his, me and him will ride out on the cow-trail—on a milk-and-butter round-up. It’s not so late in the season yit.”

Again that day the man and the boy went up to their farm-work. When they returned to the fort at sunset, Mr. Dayberry was driving the wagon, and Thad was riding, without a saddle, a handsome, round-backed young sorrel horse. The animal had been ridden before, but not for a month or two, and was disposed to be a little playful. However, he was not of a vicious breed, and already Thad had him fairly gentle and bridle-wise again.

After entering the fort, the boy, who was very proud of his horse, dismounted and showed him to his mother and the children. He also showed him to the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Wilkinsons, and was well pleased when both Marzee and Tilda Totty, who was spending the night with Marzee, admired the animal very much. Later Thad took the horse out and lariatied him where green grass was abundant.

When morning came, Mr. Dayberry, standing out in the front yard, remarked:

“Well, Thad boy, this is the day we ride out and round up some milk-stock. If you’ll go and fetch in our horses, I’ll rustle around and see if I cain’t find somebody else that wants to help. I’ve already spoke to Mr. Wilkins, and he’s glad enough to swap work with us. As soon as we can bring in what cows we need for ourselves, we’ll drive some home for him. But I’d like one or two more hands. You recollect what a time we had last spring, down in Parker. Same breed of cows up here, I’ve no doubt.”

“Pa, I’m almost certain I can get Charley Dick to help us, and maybe Mr. Sheegog too.”

“If you think so, you’d better step over there and see what they say.”

Thad walked across to the Sheegog house, then went on to where both his own horse and his father’s saddle-horse were staked out. Soon he came back with a coiled rawhide lariat in each hand and the two horses at his heels. He reported that both Mr. Sheegog and Charley Dick would join them in their cow-hunt. Indeed, the two could already be seen saddling their horses in front of their home.

“Pity you hain’t got a saddle, Thad. Reckon you couldn’t borry one from somebody for the day?”

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## THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

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"Don't know. But I can try."

"Why not run over and ask Val Graham for his?"

"Charley Dick has borrowed Val's, I guess. Said he was going to. I might try at Mr. Hendricks's."

"Go ahead, then, as quick as you can."

The Hendricks house, a double or two-room cabin, stood on the north side of the square. Harrison Hendricks, a boy about as old as Thad, but not so large, was standing in the doorway. To him Thad told his errand.

"Pa's not at home, but you can nave the saddle. He won't care. It's out there in the smoke-house." Harrison led the way around to a little building in the back yard.

Soon Thad was crossing the square toward his home, with the saddle on his back and a stirrup over each shoulder.

Mr. Dayberry had his horse saddled by this time. Now Thad quickly threw the borrowed saddle over Ped, the young horse, girted it fast, and shortened the stirrups. Mr. Wilkins also had his saddled horse standing at his door. Soon the three mounted and rode away. From her front yard Mrs. Dayberry called after them:

"Silas, be sure to drive up all the white cows and all the yellow cows you can find. Cows of those colors always give the richest, creamiest milk—so everybody says!"

"Risk us to look out for the right colors, ma!" her husband called back. "And if we cain't find white cows, we'll burn some lime and whitewash 'em!"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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While crossing the square, the little party were joined by Mr. Sheegog and Charley Dick. Then all five of them rode on and passed out at the northeast corner. From there they followed up the wooded branch which lay north of the fort. Charley Dick was mounted on black Bob, the same horse that he and Thad had ridden over to the Cross Timbers.

“Think you can outrun a cow-brute on that nag, Charley Dick?” Mr. Dayberry inquired.

But it was Mr. Wilkins that answered: “If you’d seen old Bob come clatterin’ acrossst the prairie the other day, with two boys on deck and a hog in tow, you wouldn’t have thought he was as slow as he looks.”

“Bob ain’t the fastest nag in the world,” spoke up Mr. Sheegog, “but neither is he the slowest. He can make tracks purty peert when he onct gits under full swing.”

“If I cain’t ketch a cow on ’im, I can keep in sight till somebody else ketches her,” Charley Dick said.

After following up the branch to its head, the cow-hunters rode on across the high prairie, toward Williams Creek.

This country, one of the finest grazing countries in the world, was largely given up to cattle-raising. The few scattering settlements were along the creeks or in the timber, but never out on the high prairie. Wherever one went, groups of long-horned cattle could be seen grazing. There were even wild cattle here—cattle which wore no man’s brand and acknowledged no owner. Those had been in the country since long before the

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## THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

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first settler had built his cabin here; a century or two before, perhaps. The wild cattle staid mostly in the woods in the daytime, venturing out upon the prairie only after dark. Like all the longhorns, they were of the old Spanish breed, which had spread over the whole of Texas from Mexico. But they were as wild as deer, had a fierce, shaggy look, and for some reason did not mingle much with the later comers, the branded cattle.

But most of the cattle, though more or less wild, wore brands and had owners. Some of the cattle-raisers owned many thousand head—just how many they themselves did not know—which roamed over an extensive region. In the late spring bands of cowboys would pass through the country, branding calves; and in the late summer or early fall the same bands would pass through again, rounding up beef-steers to drive to market. Those were about the only attentions the cattle received.

But the people of Fort Blocker were settlers—farmers—and depended mainly upon the soil for a livelihood. They raised horses and hogs, and some of them even sheep for wool, but no cattle. Most of them, knowing no better, had brought a few cows when they first moved into the country; but they had no cows now. It seemed impossible to raise cattle here on a small scale.

Any ranchman, or even cowboy, would have got fighting-mad if accused of driving off somebody else's stock. But it was an undoubted fact that the man who was not constantly looking after his cattle would soon have no cattle to look after. Nor were the lost animals

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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stolen by Indians. Eager as the Comanches were for horses and mules, they seldom troubled other stock, and never drove them off. There was no need for them to steal cattle. Out in the unsettled wilds they had plenty of cattle of their own—buffaloes.

But, though the settlers were unable to keep cows of their own, they could have and did have all the cows they wanted to use. The ranchmen were willing enough for any of their cows to be milked. In fact, they would have preferred to have them all milked. For keeping them in a pen and milking them rendered both the cows and their calves gentler and easier to drive. So when spring opened, and the great prairies grew green under the sunshine and the warm south winds, the settlers would saddle their horses, ride out and drive home such cows with young calves as struck their fancy. And that without asking leave of the owners or anybody else. It was this method of obtaining milch-cattle that the party from Fort Blocker were now following.

After approaching two little grazing droves without finding any cows whose looks pleased them, the cow-hunters rode on to the third drove. Among those they noticed one cow with a very young calf. She was a tall, rather gaunt-looking animal, mostly white, with some reddish spots sprinkled along her sides, and with long legs and unusually long horns. As the riders drew near, she shook her head at them threateningly.

“Looks to me like she might be a purty good milker,” Mr. Dayberry remarked. “She’s the color my wife dotes on, too. So I think we’ll take her back home with us, boys.”

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## THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

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First cutting her out from the other cattle, they tried to drive her toward the fort. But she dashed back and forth, running in every direction but the right one. The calf, seemingly only a day or two old, was still rather wabby on his legs. Sometimes he would run by the cow's side or close at her heels; but as often he would start off by himself, much to the cow's distress. When once the little fellow got under way, he could run pretty well. But he seemed to have trouble in stopping. The mother cow's anxiety for her offspring was very noticeable. When the calf would not follow the cow, the cow would run after the calf.

Finally the cow struck off across the prairie with the calf at her heels, and with the five horsemen clattering along in furious pursuit. But soon the calf turned aside and started off on a course of his own. In the excitement of the chase the cow failed to discover that the calf was not with her, and she ran on alone.

Three of the riders kept after the cow, but Thad and his father turned and pursued the calf.

The little fellow ran a few hundred yards, then made a circuit and came to a standstill. As the two pursuers approached, he started again, but only to tumble into a deep gully, or water-dug trench, which the tall grass, of last year's growth, concealed.

Hastily Mr. Dayberry reined up his horse and sprang to the ground. Before the astonished calf could regain his feet, the man had dropped down into the gully and seized him. Now the little brute uttered a loud, frightened bellow—a cry to the mother cow for help.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Mr. Dayberry glanced around, plainly undecided what to do with the calf now that he had caught him. But Thad shouted:

“Hand ’im up to me, pa! Hand ’im right up to me and I’ll get ’im home!”

Though a few hundred yards away, the cow had heard her calf’s plaintive cry for help. Promptly she turned, and in spite of the three horsemen she made straight for the calf as fast as her long legs could carry her. Mr. Dayberry saw her coming, and knew there was not a moment to lose. With the calf in his arms he sprang out of the gully.

“Yes, take ’im—take ’im quick, and ride for the fort as hard as you can clatter! Old Specklesides will be on top of you if you don’t!”

The young horse tried to shy away, but Thad held him till his father could lay the calf across the saddle in front of Thad. The little fellow’s body rested in the saddle, while his tail and hind legs hung down on one side, and his head and fore legs stuck out on the other side.

Frightened at his strange position, the calf’s eyes seemed about to pop out, and again he uttered that plaintive bellow.

Now scarcely more than a hundred yards away, the mother cow not only heard her offspring’s cry, but saw what was happening to him. On she came, faster, more furiously!

“Go! Ride as hard as you can!” shouted Mr. Dayberry. And he ran to his own horse and leaped into the saddle.

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## THE ROUNDING UP OF SPECKLESIDES

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But the boy had seen the enraged cow coming, and he needed no urging. Heading the spirited young horse toward the fort, he gave him the quirt. Away they went, full-tilt, helter-skelter!

Now began a wild race. Knowing that his horse would be in danger from the cow's sharp horns if she got close enough, Thad rode recklessly. Every now and then the terrified calf uttered a loud bellow, thus causing the mother cow to run faster.

Mr. Dayberry prudently spurred his horse to one side to give her a clear course. But the moment she was safely past he turned and joined the other three horsemen in pursuing her.

Away they all dashed across the uneven prairie. Thad with the calf was still well in the lead on his young horse. Next came that long-legged cow, fury in her eyes as she rushed to the rescue of her captive offspring. And close behind the cow clattered the four riders, all riding at breakneck speed to keep from being left behind.

"Go it, Thad! Ride hard, or she'll ketch you!" yelled Charley Dick, excitedly, as he laid his quirt to black Bob. That horse was running well. Only Mr. Dayberry was ahead of Charley Dick.

Thad needed no urging. For every time he glanced over his shoulder he could tell that the cow was gaining on him. If the young horse did not do better, she would be upon them before they could reach the fort. So he urged Ped to better speed.

On coming to the wooded branch, he followed down the south side of that. At their present reckless gait,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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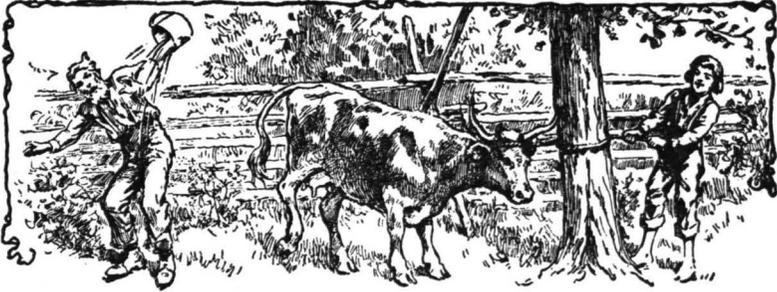
this would be the only safe way down into the valley. The boy found himself wondering what would happen if the horse should stumble.

But Ped was built for running, and not once did he miss his footing. Soon that square of log cabins came into view.

Through the open corner of the fort the young rider plunged, with the cow but a few yards in his rear. Not for a moment did he dare to draw rein. And at varying distances behind the cow rode the other horsemen.

As the clatter and thunder of hoofs startled the peaceful fort, women suddenly appeared in the open doorways. Some of them slammed their door-shutters to, and others began to scream to their children.

But the children playing in the square needed no warning. Already, frightened at the sight of the furious cow, they were rushing wildly to shelter. Even two men, talking busily at Uncle Johnny McDaniel's wood-pile, suddenly turned and made a dash for the nearest doorway,



## VIII

### SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

ON across the square Thad dashed, at full speed, the frightened calf bellowing against him, and the vengeful cow clattering on his trail. How he could escape her fury was worrying him, till he saw a girl standing in Mr. Wilkins's front door.

"Open your cow-lot gate, Marzee!" he yelled, frantically.

If the girl had hesitated, it would have been too late. But promptly the door-shutter was jerked to and she disappeared. A little later, looking between the Wilkins house and his own home, Thad saw the cow-pen gate swing wide, and Marzee climbing to a safe perch on the fence.

"Get back into the house!" he shouted, fearful for her safety. But the girl only climbed a rail or two higher and stood holding to the gate-post.

The younger Dayberry children were at their own door, staring at what was coming. Now Thad saw his mother jerk them inside and slam the clapboard shutter after them. Then he plunged in between the two houses, that house and Mr. Wilkins's, and rode straight for the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Wilkins cow-pen, fifty yards beyond. The cow-pen gate being wide open, he dashed through it, wondering vaguely as he did so if he would be able to drop the calf and ride out without getting his horse gored.

But Marzee's presence of mind removed that difficulty for him. The gate, which was made of rived timbers, was neither large nor heavy, and it opened outward. As Thad with his terrified, bellowing calf plunged through the gateway, Marzee, leaning over, held to the gate-post with one hand and swung the gate shut with the other, almost in the enraged mother cow's face. The brute stopped suddenly, not a moment too soon to save butting her nose against the gate-timbers.

Scarcely was Thad inside when he began to circle round the pen. He was expecting to drop the calf without stopping, and then dash out while the cow was following his circuit, and before she could overtake him. But on discovering that the cow was shut out, he quickly reined up his horse and sprang to the ground. Pulling the panic-stricken, pop-eyed calf from across the saddle, he set the little fellow down on his wabbly legs. Then the boy drew a long breath of relief and glanced about him.

To get to her precious offspring, the frantic cow was threatening to break through the gate, or to jump over it. If she broke in or was let in in her present temper, there was danger that she might lunge at the horse, or even at Thad.

To save rails, Mr. Wilkins had built his cow-pen with its back against the back of the Dayberry cow-pen. There was only a single fence between them; and even

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## SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

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that had not yet been stake-and-ridered. Leading his horse over there, Thad began to let down a corner of the partition-fence.

“What you doin’ there, boy?” called out his father. The four horsemen outside had reined up back at a prudent distance from the angry cow.

“Going to hustle Ped out of here before that wicked brute breaks in!”

As soon as the fence was low enough to step over, Thad led the horse through into the Dayberry pen. Then he was starting to put up the fence, when his father called out:

“No, let it lower, Thad—let it down to the ground. Then we can drive the cow and calf right through into their own pen.”

So Thad opened both panels to the bottom rails. After that he let down the bars—their pen had bars instead of a gate—and led his horse out. Having put up the bars, he sprang into his saddle and rode round to where the other cow-hunters were sitting on their horses.

“Now how can we get her inside?” he asked.

Marzee, still perched on the fence by the gate, looked at him and answered:

“I think I can let her in, if you’re ready for me to.”

“All right! Let her in before she breaks in!” said Mr. Dayberry.

The gate was not fastened. Holding to the top of the gate-post with one hand, the girl leaned over, and with the other hand pushed the gate slowly back. As soon as the opening was wide enough for the cow to

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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get her head in, she rushed through and ran to her calf. Now she lowed over the little fellow delightedly, and stood with her nose against him.

“Well, that was a purty lively race, but about as easy a way to git a cow and calf to the pen as a body could think of, seems to me like,” remarked Mr. Wilkins, after they had all dismounted to let their panting horses rest.

“I don’t know so well about the easy part,” grinned Thad. “If Marzee hadn’t opened that gate just when she did, I might have been riding round and round till yet to keep that brute from catching me. And if Marzee hadn’t shut the gate just when she did, Ped would have had a hard scrabble getting out of that pen with a whole hide. Don’t believe I want any more like that.”

“As long as you come through it all safe and sound, what’s the differ’nce, Thad?” demanded Charley Dick.

“Yes, Marzee helped us the best kind,” Mr. Dayberry remarked.

And Mr. Sheegog added: “She didn’t git frustrated and lose her head, like most girls would have.”

Marzee smiled shyly and looked pleased, but said nothing. Soon she sprang down from the fence.

“Don’t believe I ever saw a milch-cow brought from the prairie to the pen just like that before,” remarked Captain Totty. He had watched that whirlwind sweep through the fort, and he and others had walked over to learn how the race had ended.

While the horses were still resting, Mr. Dayberry approached the pen and said:

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## SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

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“I’d like to get old Specklesides and her calf through into their own pen. Then she can stay there a while till she grows used to the place.”

The cow and calf were easily driven through the open gap, and then the gap was partly laid up. Only partly, for it might be convenient to run other cows into the Dayberry pen through the Wilkins pen.

When their horses had rested long enough, the party of five mounted and rode away eastward to the prairie again. In an hour or two they returned, this time driving a red cow with her calf. Those, too, were penned, and the party brought in another cow and calf before they stopped for dinner. That made the third cow. They had started with still another, a fourth; but her calf was older, and the cow and calf had taken refuge in the Williams Creek brush, where the hunters had to abandon them.

The day was now far spent; for the horsemen had not stopped to eat till near the middle of the afternoon. Dinner over, they rode out again and brought in one more cow with her calf. That made four for the Dayberrys—all that they expected to need.

The following day was spent in rounding up five cows for the Wilkinses, and the day after in bringing home four more for the Sheegog family. After that this particular party of cow-hunters rested from their cow-hunting for a season. However, there were other similar parties riding out almost every day; and one or more of them kept riding till the last family in the fort had been supplied with milk and butter.

Mr. Dayberry and Thad left their four cows in the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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pen with the calves the first night. They did not try to do any milking, but carried flat stones into the pen and salted every cow. Next morning they went among them again, rubbing them and trying to gentle them. Two of the cows had evidently been milked before, and gave little trouble. But Specklesides, as the white cow was already beginning to be called, resented any attempt to extract milk from her. And the remaining cow, a heavy-set, brindled brute, was even worse if possible. Neither tried to use her horns, but they kicked viciously every time anybody touched them.

“Don’t hurry ’em—let’s not hurry ’em,” Mr. Dayberry said to Thad, patiently. “They’ll come round all right by and by, I guess. They gener’ly do.”

The calves were all very young, and no serious attempt to take any milk was made for nearly a week. In the daytime the cows were turned out to graze, but at night they were left in the pen with their calves. Later, when the calves became old enough to eat grass, they would be turned out at night.

Regularly at every milking-time Mr. Dayberry and Thad went among the cows, rubbing them and talking to them, and sometimes salting them. But as soon as the milk was fit to drink, they proceeded to milk in earnest.

The two cows that had been milked before were a little restless at first, but soon got used to the process and submitted quietly. But when Specklesides was approached, trouble set in at once.

At first she would not allow either of the milkers to touch her. After being hemmed up in a fence-corner,

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## SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

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she submitted to being rubbed; but at every attempt to milk her that long hind leg of hers flew up with amazing force and swiftness.

That, however, was nothing unusual with cows just brought in from the range. Mr. Dayberry, who was doing the milking, used a half-gallon tin cup, and kept himself at arm's length from the cow. No sooner had she kicked than Specklesides would break away and run round the pen two or three times before Thad and his father could stop her.

"All right, Madam Speckle!" the man finally exclaimed. "If you've got to be tied, you've got to be tied! Run and fetch a stake-rope, Thad!"

The boy crawled through the bars and hurried up to the house. Soon he returned with a rawhide lariat.

A noosed end of the rope was now thrown over the cow's horns, and her head was drawn up to within a foot of a tree-trunk. The lariat was wrapped two or three times around the tree, and Thad held it fast while his father made another attempt to milk.

Now the cow stood as still as a stump till the cup was nearly half-full. Then, suddenly, that white hind leg flashed, the cup flew upward from the milker's hands with a clang, and a shower of milk rained down. The cow tried to run round the tree, but Mr. Dayberry stood in his tracks.

"Knocked fire out of that cup, didn't she, pa?"

"Yes, and milk too." The man wiped his dripping face with his hand, and then gazed down ruefully at his milk-bespattered clothes. Soon he walked over and picked up the cup. "Not battered so very bad. Tie

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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your rope, Thad, and grab a rail. We'll see who's boss of this cow-lot."

He went up to the house and washed out the cup, then came back. Thad had tied the rawhide hard and fast, and was now standing with a rail in his hands.

"Put that under her, just in front of her hind legs. There, that's about right. Now let her kick as hard as she pleases!"

Thad had thrust the rail's farther end into the fence. The other end he was holding.

Again Specklesides stood quietly till the milking-cup was pretty well filled. Then that energetic hind leg got in motion again. But this time it struck the sharp edge of the post-oak rail and stopped suddenly.

"That's the caper!" exclaimed Mr. Dayberry. "Kick whenever you feel like it, and as hard as you feel like!" He went on with his milking.

When the cup was full, he emptied it into the bucket, then came back and milked what was left. Twice more Specklesides had kicked, but the protecting rail had rendered her kicks harmless, and had doubtless hurt her leg besides. After that she seemed to realize the folly of further resistance.

The milking ended, Mr. Dayberry rubbed the cow from her horns to her hind legs. Then the rail was dropped, and Thad took off the rope and let her go.

The brindled cow was even worse. Both the rope and the rail had to be used with her from the start.

When milking-time came again, Specklesides was both roped and railed. She kicked but once, and even that was not very hard. In a few days, by firm but not

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## SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

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unkind treatment, she could be milked without either rope or rail.

After that, though it was considered safer to stoop than to sit down by her, and to hold the cup at arm's length, the cow seemed to realize that resistance was useless, and even worse than useless. Gradually, too, she began to yield to kind treatment. So, for that matter, did many of the range cows. Eventually she became almost as gentle as if she had grown up in a barnyard instead of out on wild prairies.

But not so the brindled cow. When drawn up to a tree, with a rail in front of her hind legs, she had to stand and be milked. But as soon as the rail was taken away she began to kick, and as soon as the rope was untied from her horns she refused to let anybody touch her.

Seeing at length that it would be well-nigh impossible to tame such a vicious brute, Mr. Dayberry turned both her and her calf out and let them wander back to the prairie.

On the other side of the partition-fence Mr. Wilkins and Marzee, who always helped him milk, were having similar troubles. Two of their cows proved practically untamable, and were turned out with their calves and allowed to go.

To supply the places of the unmilkable animals, Mr. Wilkins, Mr. Dayberry and Thad saddled their horses one morning, rode out upon the prairie and drove home three more cows with young calves. All those proved fairly satisfactory, and the two families were abundantly supplied with milk and butter from this time on.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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In the Dayberry pen Specklesides soon became the favorite. Few of the longhorn cows gave very much milk; but she was a natural milker, and yielded more than any two of the others. And Mrs. Dayberry insisted that her milk was richer than the other cows' milk, and made more butter.

With Specklesides' devotion to her calf was the distinguishing trait. In her the mother instinct was unusually strong. All the range cows were greatly attached to their calves when the calves were very young; and they were ready to fight for them at any time. But as the calves grew older and larger they were more and more neglected. Many of the cows could not long be depended upon to come home at milking-time.

But the affection of Specklesides for her offspring never grew cold. When separated from him, she seemed restless and anxious. For a week or two she refused to venture out of sight, or at the farthest out of hearing, of the pen. And she was quick to take alarm at any unusual noise, such as yelling, or the barking of a dog.

And woe to the unlucky cur that ventured near the pen her calf was in! If he escaped being tossed on her long, sharp horns the first time, he was too badly frightened ever to venture near there again.

After Specklesides got to going farther away, if she did not happen to be at the pen at milking-time, Thad would sometimes yell "Sick 'em! Sick 'em!" as if to a dog. Promptly the cow would come tearing through the woods from the creek, with her head held

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## SPECKLESIDES AND LITTLE FRIZZLY

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high and a fierce look in her eyes which said plainly: "Just touch my calf if you dare!"

The object of all that motherly anxiety and watchfulness was as ungainly a little quadruped as one could find. He looked not at all like his mother, but was of a brindled color, with a small body, a large head and a pair of strikingly large ears. The ears sometimes flapped loosely, and sometimes assumed various rigid positions. But in spite of his lack of beauty, Specklesides evidently considered him the most remarkable calf in the world. When outside she would stand and gaze between the rails by the hour. And when let into the pen, she would run to him even more eagerly than he ran to her.

Specklesides' greatest delight seemed to be to lick her calf from end to end. Scarcely a square inch of his shaggy coat escaped her rough but caressing tongue. Sometimes she would begin at his nose and lick backwards, laying every hair down smooth.

"Makes the little feller look as slick as a peeled onion," Mr. Dayberry remarked one morning, after one of the nose-to-tail lickings had been completed.

Thad laughed. "Looks like he's got hair-oil on his hair."

But just as often Specklesides would begin at the calf's tail and lick forward, thus turning all his hair the wrong way. It was after one of those tail-to-nose lickings that Mr. Wilkins, milking in the adjoining pen, was moved to exclaim:

"Now he looks more like a frizzly chicken than anything else!"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“That’s what he does,” laughingly agreed Thad.

So Frizzly the little bull’s name promptly became. And by that name he was called for the rest of his life.

Frizzly, it was soon noticed, was a queer mixture of timidity and curiosity. He never saw anything, from a blowing shuck to a wagon and team, that he did not wish to investigate. With nose outstretched and his big ears pointing forward, he would approach, step by step, the object of his interest, trying to get close enough to smell it. If the object happened to make a sudden motion, Frizzly would take fright and scamper away as fast as his awkward legs could carry him. But soon he would return, and return again and again.

Poor ugly, funny little Frizzly! His career was short and his latter end tragic.



## IX

### COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

**M**ANY cows were now being milked by the people of Fort Blocker; perhaps a hundred and fifty or two hundred cows in all. Cow-pens surrounded the fort on all sides except the east, where a hill arose. Some of the pens were close to the owners' houses, and some of the people had to go across the fort and beyond to milk. Most of the pens not near the owners' houses were down in the woods between the fort and the creek.

At night every cow was shut up in her pen, her calf being turned out to water and grass. But after the morning milking the calves remained in the pen and the cows went forth for the day. There was a world of grass everywhere, but usually the cows liked to graze off for a mile or two. And sometimes they would be till after dark getting home.

Instead of all remaining together, the cows had a way of separating into little groups—grazing squads Thad's father called them. The four milked by the Dayberrys and the five milked by the Wilkinsons nearly always went off and came home together.

For two weeks or more at first Specklesides refused to join the other cows of her pen in their grazing trips.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Her feeding was done somewhere in the valley, and from time to time she would come back for a look, to make sure that her calf was safe. But after little Frizzly had grown older she began to wander with the other cows out upon the high prairie. For a few days she would leave her companions about noon and return home. But as she was never let in to her calf except at milking-time, she soon gave up those midday visits and went and returned with the other cows of her pen.

Now Mr. Dayberry told Thad to get their big cow-bell and fasten it on her neck. When that was done, the cows would be surer to stay together; and if they should ever remain out till late it would be easier to find them.

Sometimes, on being turned out after the morning milking, the Dayberry and Wilkins cows would take a path and march up to the high prairie to the east to graze. At other times they would cross the creek and climb to the prairie ridge to the west. Oftener they went toward the west, perhaps because they could drink at the creek both going and coming.

One day, not long before sundown, Mrs. Dayberry, standing in her front door, said to Thad, who was chopping at the woodpile:

“Hadn’t you better go and hurry the cows home? They may not come till about dusk; and it’ll be long after dark before you and your pa can get them all milked and I can strain the milk and wash the milk-vessels. I don’t like to be so late.”

Thad dropped his axe. “Why, yes, ma. I’d as lieve go as not.”

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## COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

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“And, Thad, won’t you please drive home our cows while you’re driving?” inquired a soft voice from the next door north.

The boy turned quickly. “Of course I will, Marzee.”

He was starting off toward the creek, when the girl called after him:

“Oh, Thad, not that way!” And as he came back she explained: “They went the other direction this morning—toward Williams Creek.” She was pointing east.

“Are you sure about that, Marzee?”

“Sure as sure can be! I was sitting right there in the door, churning, and I watched ’em cross the square and climb the hill yonder.”

“All right. Glad you told me. I’d have had my tramp west for nothing. I’ll soon have the whole bunch home. Guess I can hear old Specklesides’s bell after I get up on the high ground.”

The boy crossed the square, and was about to pass between two of the east line of houses, when he heard somebody call:

“Hey there, Thad! Where you started now?” It was Charley Dick Sheegog’s voice.

“After the cows! Want to go with me?”

“Yes, I do! Wait a minute!”

Charley Dick came hurrying from his home. Soon the two were together, and climbing the hill that rose behind the fort. On top of the hill they happened upon Veen, Jess Holloway’s friendly bulldog. Thad patted her on the head, and as they went on they noticed that she was following them.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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As soon as they were well out upon the high prairie, the boys looked for the cows they were in search of, and listened for Specklesides's bell. They saw other cows and heard other bells, but not till they had gone a mile and more, and were where they could look down into the valley of Williams Creek, did Thad hear the bell he wanted to hear. They found the nine Wilkins and Dayberry cows together, and all down in a deep branch, fringed with persimmon bushes and trees, which ran toward Williams Creek. The cows had probably drank at the creek earlier in the day, and then spent several hours lying lazily in the shade.

When the boys came in sight, the grazing animals raised their heads and looked. But seeing only familiar faces and figures, they went to cropping the grass again. Their heads were toward the fort, but they were taking several bites for every step they advanced.

The two boys followed along the top of the hill till they were beyond the cows, then went down and came up in their rear. Approaching the hindmost animals, they slapped them on the hips and sides. But, as everybody knows who ever tried to drive cows home at night, the greedy brutes would only move forward a few reluctant steps, then stop and go to stuffing themselves with grass again. The boys went from cow to cow, slapping them and scolding them, and otherwise urging them along.

"They're the worst-starved bunch of milk-cattle I ever did see!" Thad exclaimed, impatiently, after the two had spent a few minutes getting the cows a few rods nearer home. "Move on here, you greedy wenches!"

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## COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

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Don't lie in the shade so long next time, and then you won't be so hungry!"

"Twist their tails, Thad! Twist their tails!"

Charley Dick himself seized a cow's tail, and Thad, prompt to act upon the suggestion, did the same. Thad had hold of Specklesides' tail, and Charley Dick was about to twist the Wilkineses' spotted cow's tail, when Veen, the dog that was following them, suddenly began to bark loudly, fiercely.

Both boys looked back. What they saw was startling beyond words.

Three or four hundred yards to the rear two horsemen were just riding into view on top of the hill that sloped downward to the branch. While the boys, in blank consternation, were still staring at those hatless figures, three other hatless horsemen appeared on the hill-top. There could be no mistaking those swarthy faces and that jet-black hair. The horsemen were Indian warriors!

For several moments Thad's heart seemed to stand still. Then he swept one hurried glance around. His first impulse was to dive into a near thicket and try to hide. But a second thought told him that he and Charley Dick had already been seen, and would quickly be dragged out of their hiding-place.

Then he thought of making a wild dash for the fort. But the distance was a mile and more, across open prairie. They would certainly be overtaken and captured or shot down before they could get well started.

"What can we do—what *can* we do?" Thad kept repeating to himself, in an agony of distress.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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He glanced toward his friend. Charley Dick, paralyzed with horror, only stood and stared at the savages. He seemed unable to move. Thad, too, was well-nigh helpless with terror. His knees grew weak, and seemed about to sink down under him. No possible way of escape could he think of.

“If I’d only brought my rifle! If I’d only brought my rifle!” he almost groaned. He was thinking that they could have got down into the ravine, among the bushes, and perhaps have held the savages at bay. But they had not suspected danger so near the fort, and neither had a weapon of any kind.

Suddenly the Comanches began to yell furiously, exultantly as, with one accord, they bore down at full speed upon the two helpless white boys. They had doubtless discovered that the boys were unarmed, and they believed that capturing them would be speedy and easy.

At the first yell every cow threw up her head and looked back. Specklesides doubtless believed that the yelling meant harm to little Frizzly; for she uttered one defiant bellow and started for the fort! And the eight other cows started with her.

Thad, clutching the bell-cow’s tail in the act of twisting it, had been too terrified to let go. Jerked forward suddenly, it flashed upon him that if he could only keep his grasp on that tail, Specklesides would get him to the fort before—long before he could get there unaided. For already she was going at a gallop.

“Grab a tail, Charley Dick!” he managed to shout. He was taking wonderful strides—longer, perhaps, than

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## COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

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any bare-footed boy ever took before. He dared not so much as glance behind.

“Got a tail!” answered Charley Dick’s voice, but a few yards to the rear. Stampeded by those fierce war-whoops, all the cows were running for home as if for life.

Away the nine milk-cattle clattered across the prairie, the bell-cow’s bell ringing furiously. Those longhorn cows could always give a horse a good race. And just now these were in a panic. Every time Thad lifted a foot, he seemed to step six or eight yards before he could set it down again. He wanted to look back, to see how close their savage pursuers were, but dared not lest he should miss his footing. Let that happen once, and all his hopes of reaching the fort alive would be at an end. His breath was coming and going in explosive gasps.

But in spite of the panic-stricken cows’ speed, those yells behind seemed all the time to be drawing closer. As Specklesides was in the lead, the fear entered Thad’s heart that his friend had either been overtaken or had lost his hold.

“Are you—hanging on—Charley Dick?” he managed to gasp, explosively, while seeming to fly through the air.

“You bet I’m—hangin’ on!” came back, still not far to the rear.

Charley Dick was safe so far. Thad felt greatly encouraged now. If they could only keep this up for a few minutes longer, he believed they could both reach Fort Blocker in spite of their mounted pursuers. But

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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those yells sounded dangerously near now, and fiendishly loud.

On clattered and thundered the terrified cows. Specklesides, with her big bell clanging frightfully, was still in the lead; but Thad could hear the other cows' hoofs pounding the earth almost at his heels. A frontier boy, he had never so much as heard of Mercury and his winged sandals; but it seemed to him that he must be taking some such prodigious steps as mythology would have us believe that Mercury took. But even that speed could not shake off their relentless pursuers.

Hearing panting close by, Thad cast a glance to the left and saw the dog running along near Specklesides. Even Veen seemed to realize the urgency of reaching the fort.

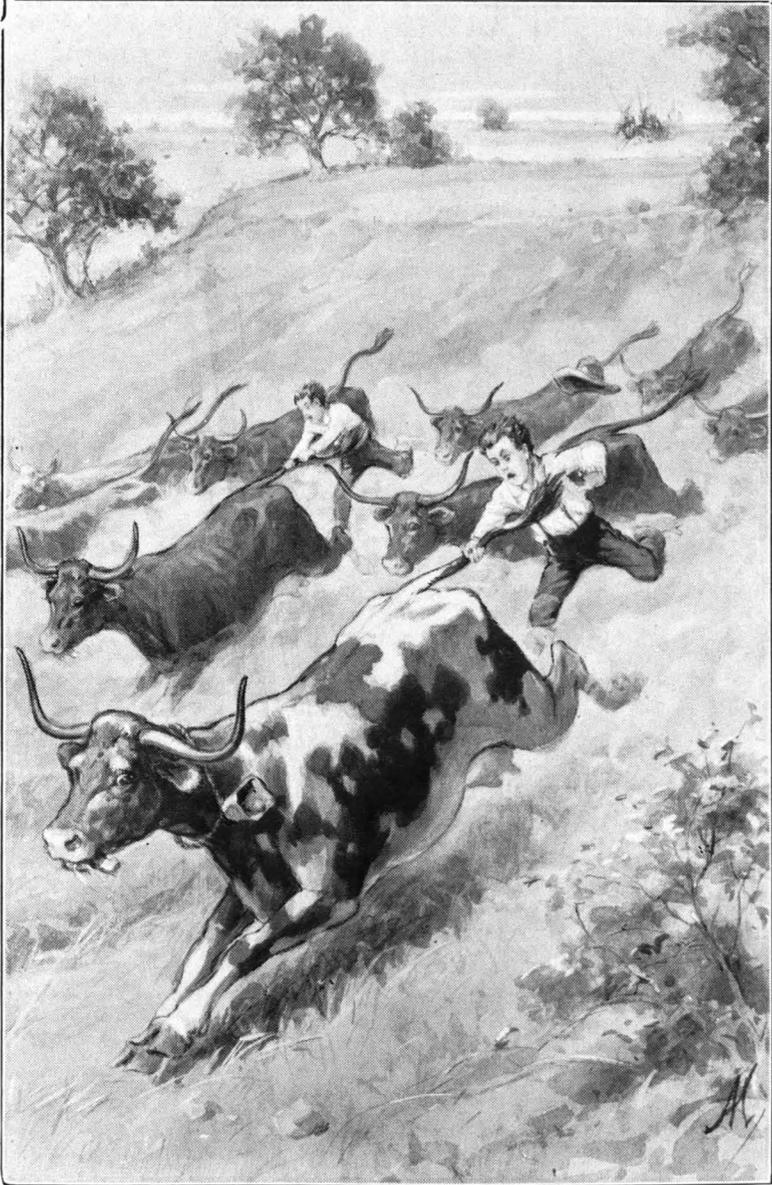
A few hundred yards farther on the boy bounding along at Specklesides' tail managed to call back, encouragingly:

"Hang tight, Charley Dick!"

"Hangin' tight! Cain't hang—any tighter!" came out of the clatter of hoofs behind, in tones that bore no trace of wavering.

Very hopeful Thad felt now. But, breathless and half-dizzy with his own frightful speed, he was afraid—afraid that the boy behind would become exhausted, and either lose his grip or miss his footing. If so, those blood-thirsty wolves yelping on their trail would make short work of him.

"Don't let—let go—Charley Dick!" he managed to call out, gaspingly. His lungs, rising and falling like a pair of bellows, were hurting him.



"ON CLATTERED AND THUNDERED THE TERRIFIED COWS."



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## COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

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“Not till—tail comes—off!” was the answer. But it seemed farther behind. Specklesides was gaining on Charley Dick’s cow.

Believing that the savages must now be close upon the boy in the rear, Thad cast one hasty, frightened glance over his shoulder. The warriors were still a good distance behind, but leaning low and riding furiously. They seemed to be within bow-shot, however. If so, they were not shooting because they expected to capture the fugitives alive.

A few hundred yards more, and something whisked by Thad’s head. Before he could think what it was, Specklesides gave a terrific bound and seemed to run faster. He did not know that an arrow aimed at him had missed its mark and wounded the cow.

Now the yells ceased suddenly. Thad wondered if the red fiends had shot Charley Dick and stopped to scalp him. He tried to look back, but so fast was he bouncing up and down that he could distinguish nothing. As he turned his eyes ahead again, he saw a square of log cabins below him. At last he had reached the top of the hill at whose foot sat the fort and safety.

Next thing he knew, Specklesides was plunging recklessly down the hill. Fearing that they might both break their necks, Thad let her tail go and tried to stop.

But his momentum was too great. Down he sprawled, and then went rolling and tumbling all the way to the bottom of the hill! He picked himself up but a few yards from Captain Graham’s back door. Specklesides had dashed between two houses, Graham’s and Totty’s, and was running on across the square.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Startled by the clatter of hoofs and the bell, Judy Graham, the captain's pretty sixteen-year-old daughter, had rushed to the rear door in time to see the boy come tumbling down.

"Why, Thad Dayberry, what in the world's the matter with you? Trying to break your neck?" she cried out.

But the little breath that his mad race with death had left in Thad had been knocked out of him by his tumble down the hill. All he could do, as he staggered to his feet, was to point back toward where he knew the Comanches to be.

Judy lifted her eyes. What she saw was eight cows coming down the hill-side as if trying to break their own necks. And at the tail of Mr. Wilkins's spotted cow a boy was dragging!

Somewhere in that mad flight, perhaps not very far back, Charley Dick had stumbled and fallen. But, knowing all too well that his life depended upon that cow, he had only gripped her tail the tighter—clutched it with a clutch of death and despair. With his eyes shut, he was letting her drag him!

On between Captain Graham's house and Captain Totty's the frightened animals dashed, and then across the square toward their own pen. The dragging boy, still blindly clutching the spotted cow's tail, was bouncing up and down like a rubber boy.

Fearing that his friend might be killed or crippled, Thad made a supreme effort and managed to yell:

"Let go, Charley Dick! In the fort now!"

And the dragging boy, fast as he was traveling,

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## COWS' TAILS TO THE RESCUE

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heard and released his hold. He kept sliding or rolling for a few yards, then lay very still. Thad and Judy hurried out, as did more than a dozen others, all half expecting to find him dead. But before they got to him he sat up.

Mr. Dayberry had been sitting on his own doorsill, and had seen Specklesides as she plunged between his house and the Wilkins house, soon followed by the eight other cows. He sprang up angrily and came hurrying out.

“Thad, what in the name of reason do you boys mean by runnin’ our milk-cows like that?” he demanded. “Hain’t you got sense enough to know—” He broke off suddenly, realizing from the two boys’ appearance that something serious must be the matter.

“Redskins—after us!” Charley Dick managed to articulate, though his whole body was now moving convulsively with his labored breathing.

“Redskins! How many?” demanded Captain Totty, one of those who had come hurrying out.

“Five!” Thad told him. “They got after us—”

“And they’d have ketched us—” supplied Charley Dick.

“But we hung to—” Thad gasped again.

“To the cows’ tails—” Charley Dick was able to supply.

“And we outran ’em!” completed Thad.

Here Marzee Wilkins, who had been standing in her own door, and had seen the bell-cow’s side as she dashed in between the two cabins, came running out to the group in the square.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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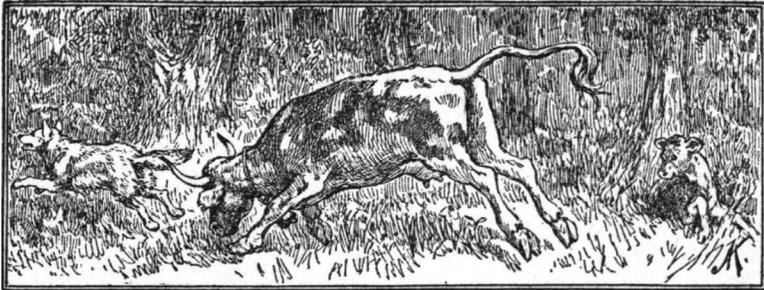
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“Oh, Mr. Dayberry, old Specklesides has got an arrow in her shoulder! And the blood’s gushing out!” she cried excitedly.

“Run for your guns, men!” ordered Captain Totty. “And jump on your horses if you’ve got ’em handy! Must be more than five Indians, or they wouldn’t dare venture so close! They may be about to attack the fort!”

Instantly the group scattered, all hurrying to their homes. Everybody in the fort had heard the captain’s orders, and knew that Indians were near, and that the fort might be attacked at any minute.

There was no noticeable excitement; or at least none of a noisy kind. A few minutes before, when Specklesides and Thad had come down the hill, the fort had been alive and noisy with children at play, running and laughing and shouting. But all that was hushed instantly as the playful ones retreated to their own doors, and were hastily pulled inside by their mothers. Indeed, the only noticeable thing just now was an ominous silence, while the men were arming.



## X

### FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

SOON every man and big boy in the fort had buckled on a six-shooter or two, thrown his powder-horn and ammunition-bag over his head, caught down his gun from the rack, and was out in the square, ready to do battle. Several who happened to have horses at hand clapped bridles on their heads and mounted, most of them without waiting to saddle. The other men hurried toward the east side of the square on foot.

"How many Indians do they say there are?" one woman now called to another, her next-door neighbor.

"I don't know. Do you know, Mis' Hendricks?" the second woman called to her neighbor on the other side.

"No, I don't. But if they're going to attack the fort, must be a hundred or two."

"She says there must be a hundred or two," the middle woman now called back to the one who had first asked the question.

"They say there's a hundred or two," that woman passed on along the line.

"There's a hundred or two of 'em!" the next

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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woman called to the woman beyond. And so the report traveled.

Among those who had horses within reach were Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Dayberry. Both took time to throw on their saddles. Scarcely had they mounted when Mrs. Dayberry had her husband's six-shooter and shot-gun ready, and Marzee was reaching a rifle and a six-shooter up to her father. Presently both men were galloping across the square to join the other defenders. Some of the men on foot were already climbing the hill that Thad had tumbled down.

After arriving at his home, Thad had been standing, leaning against the wall, till he could regain his breath. But as he watched the men and big boys climbing the hill, the warlike spirit seized him. Hurrying inside, he caught down his flintlock and its ammunition, and was quickly out and running across the square.

"Thaddy! Thaddy Dayberry! You march right back here, as straight as you can march!" ordered his mother, who was over in the next yard, talking to Mrs. Wilkins.

"Ma, I'm bound to go—I'm just naturally bound to go and help fight the red boogers!" protested the boy.

"No, you don't have to help fight the red boogers! You're too little to fight red boogers! Let your pa and the other men do the fighting! They'll whip 'em without any of your help. You stay right here at home! That's the place for you!"

Thad hesitated. Usually he had plenty of respect for parental authority, but for once he was reluctant to obey; the more so because Marzee was standing in the

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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next yard, watching him when not watching the men climbing the hill.

“But, ma, I’m fourteen, going on fifteen! And I’m growing fast! I’ll soon be a man!” urged the distressed boy. “You don’t want me to grow up a coward, do you? Folks will be saying you’ve got a coward for a son!”

“You tell ’em I wouldn’t let you go!”

“Then they’ll say I’m tied to my mammy’s apron strings!”

“Believe I’d let the boy go on, Mrs. Dayberry, if I was you,” now spoke up Mrs. Wilkins, who saw how eager Thad was to follow the men. “If there are only five Comanches, won’t be much of a fight anyhow. The reds will soon take to their heels, I guess.”

Mrs. Dayberry hesitated. “All right, then. Go ahead, if nothing else will satisfy you! But whatever you do, don’t you venture close to any Indians! Do you hear me, Thaddy Dayberry?”

This warning was shouted after him. For at the first word of permission Thad had set off at a run.

While climbing the hill he was joined by Charley Dick.

“What you got to fight with?” he demanded.

For answer Charley Dick merely turned his back. At one side of his belt hung a six-shooter and at the other a butcher-knife. The six-shooter he had borrowed from Mrs. Weese, their next-door neighbor, whose husband was away from home.

When the two boys had gained the top of the hill, they saw that all the men on foot had stopped only a

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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few hundred yards beyond. On overtaking the party, the boys learned that the first men to climb the hill had seen the Indian horsemen plainly. The Comanches were retreating, however, and the mounted men from the fort were already half a mile away, riding in swift pursuit.

“Makin’ right straight t’wards Williams Creek, the red boogers air,” one man remarked.

“Better look sharp, the boys had. Might be a big bunch of the varmints over there,” said another man. “Them five might just have been sent out to tole us whites into a trap.”

“Cap Totty, he won’t be easy toled into narry trap, I ’low,” spoke up a third man.

“Cap’n Graham wouldn’t either, if he was here,” somebody else remarked. Only that morning Captain Graham had ridden away with a squad of scouts.

Soon the men on foot advanced about half a mile farther. There they stopped and waited till dusk. Then they returned to the fort. Not long after night-fall the mounted men also came back.

They had failed to overtake the Indians. In fact, they had not got within rifle-shot of them. It was understood that the raiding party would be pursued when daylight came again. But all knew how useless that was likely to prove. By morning the Comanches, foreseeing pursuit, would be many miles out in the wild country, on the way to their villages.

After the excitement had partially subsided, Mr. Dayberry and Thad went out to the cow-pen to milk. With the aid of a lighted candle they examined Speckle-

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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sides. Her wound was bleeding freely, but proved to be not very serious. The arrow had run along under the skin on her shoulder till it struck a bone. They succeeded in working it out, steel spike and all. The cow limped for a few days, but the wound healed quickly and was soon entirely well.

"The reason the boogers made bold to venture so close to the fort was because night was at hand. They knowed they could dodge us in the dark," Mr. Dayberry said, while he and his family were at supper.

"Looks to me like the scouts could keep 'em out if they tried harder," his wife answered, half resentfully. She was thinking of Thad's recent narrow escape.

"Easy enough to say that, ma. But when fifteen or twenty men have got thirty miles of unsettled country to patrol, it's mighty hard for 'em to be everywhere at one and the same time. And they've got hawks' eyes, the red varmints have. They lay on some high p'int and watch the scouts ride past. Then up they bounce, the sly creechers, mount their horses and push on into the settlements. And so the thing goes."

Early next morning a party from the fort set out to find and follow the raiders' trail. After an absence of three days they returned, without so much as having caught a glimpse of a redskin.

Indian raids were so common that the settlers had long since become hardened to them. For a day or two after a raiding band was known to be in the country, people would be a little more cautious when venturing far from home. But very soon they would be going about their business as usual.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Even on the day the white party started out in pursuit of the Indians, Mr. Dayberry and Thad drove up to their farm to work. And they kept going for several days. Their corn was now big enough to cultivate, and they were plowing and hoeing and thinning it at the same time. Charley Dick Sheegog was also busy helping his father with farm-work.

One night while this farming was going on, the Dayberry family, as well as others in the fort, were awakened by the loud, pitiful bleating of a calf. The cries came from somewhere down in the woods, west or southwest of the fort.

Both Mr. Dayberry and Thad sprang out of bed while still half asleep. Rushing out into the back yard, they began to yell. They knew well what was the matter. A wolf, or possibly some other beast of prey, had pounced upon the calf. Other men and boys were shouting, and many dogs were barking.

All the calves were outside now, to graze, the cows being kept in the pens at night. None of the people knew what particular calf was calling for help. But there was one that did know its voice—the mother cow. In every pen around the fort cows were rushing from side to side, bellowing defiance. There was bellowing in the Dayberry pen also, but with it was heard the crash of falling rails, and then the rapid beating of hoofs mingled with the loud ringing of a bell.

“Specklesides has jumped the fence!” cried Thad.

“Reckon it was little Frizzly we heard bl’atin’?” asked his father.

“It might have been. But whether it was or not,

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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Specklesides will make the varmint skedaddle when she gets there!"

The bleating could no longer be heard, and the bell also soon ceased to ring. The boy and his father walked out as far as the cow-pen, to put up the fallen rails. Then they came back to the house and went to bed again.

"Rather guess that's the last we'll see of our bell-cow" Thad remarked, after they had lain down.

"Yes, like as not she'll make back to the prairie, now that she's out with her calf," his father answered. "But with the bell on she won't be hard to find. We'll ride out and round her up ag'in."

But Specklesides did not go back to the range. Next morning she was at the pen, and little Frizzly was with her. The calf was lying stretched out on the ground in a fence-corner, and the cow was standing over him.

Poor little Frizzly was badly wounded. There was an ugly hole eaten in one thigh; and several other wounds, looking as if made by a sharp knife, but in reality gashed by wolf-fangs, were scattered over his small body.

No human mother ever watched over her sick baby more carefully, anxiously than Specklesides watched over Frizzly. She knew well enough that something was seriously wrong. From time to time, with her nose held close to his nose, she would utter little plaintive sounds, half of sympathy, half of distress. When anybody went near, she seemed well pleased, as if hoping that something could be done for her calf.

All day long the cow stood guard over her wounded

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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offspring. Scarcely once did she get as far as a yard from him. Usually her nose was held close to his nose; but sometimes she would lift her head high and bawl loudly, dolefully again and again.

The whole Dayberry family were very sorry for little Frizzly, and so were the neighbors, and particularly the neighbors' children; the more so, perhaps, because they had made so much fun of him before. Both Thad and his father staid at home, erecting the walls of their smaller cabin instead of going up to the farm. They protected the calf's wounds from flies, some of which would produce screw-worms. But that was all that could be done. The younger Dayberry children, and also Marzee and Florence, lingered near the calf constantly. When the sun rose high enough to be uncomfortably warm, Thad cut a pole and some brush and made a shade over the calf. The children also pulled the greenest, tenderest grass they could find and laid it at Frizzly's nose. And they brought fresh, cool water from the spring and offered it to him in the wash-pan.

But poor little Frizzly was forever past eating and drinking. He died just at sunset.

The children were very sad; and so were the rest of the family. Specklesides was inconsolable. All night long she could be heard bawling out her grief loudly, drearily. Next morning she was still standing over her dead calf.

Her signs of distress were touching. Sometimes she would lick the little cold body, and sometimes she would put her nose against the calf's nose and low to

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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him with pathetic tenderness. She fully realized that something serious was the matter, without knowing what. Scarcely for a moment did she cease her efforts to arouse her calf. Failing to call forth any response to her pleadings, or any sign of life, she would raise her head and bawl out her grief so dolefully that those who heard could scarcely keep the tears out of their eyes.

“Beats all, the way she does take on! Makes a feller feel mournful to listen to her,” declared Charley Dick, one of the numerous boys and girls who came for a look at little Frizzly.

All day poor Specklesides stood over her dead, voicing her sorrow. Thad wanted to pull grass for her, and to bring her a bucket of water. But his father advised him not to do that.

Late in the day, which was rather warm, thirst drove her to the creek for a drink. It was the first time she had left the calf since rescuing him from the wolves. Taking advantage of her absence, Mr. Dayberry and Thad lifted up poor Frizzly, one by the hind legs and the other by the fore legs, and carried him more than half a mile up the north branch. There they hid him in a thicket. From the many buzzards seen circling above the spot not very much later, they guessed that his funeral would be largely attended.

Specklesides never found her dead calf. But she seemed to believe that he was still alive, and had merely got up and wandered away during her absence. For days she went here and there, looking, looking, always looking for him. If she saw a calf, whether with

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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its mammy or alone, she would hurry to it, evidently hoping to find little lost Frizzly, alive and running about. Every calf she saw she must approach and smell, to make sure it was not hers. Finding it was not, she would wander on.

Several persons who saw her out on the prairie reported that she was wandering from one bunch of cattle to another, and always seeking her lost calf. She seemed to spend little time grazing or resting, and soon grew thin and gaunt-sided.

Every day or two, especially when the accumulated milk made her uncomfortable, she would return to her accustomed pen. And Thad—his father was now away with the scouts—would hurry out and milk her. He had already taken her bell off and put it on another cow. But as soon as the milking was finished, Specklesides would wander off again.

“Poor old Specklesides! I do believe she’s going to keep on mourning for little Frizzly and hunting for little Frizzly till she dies of grief,” the boy said, on coming in from milking her one afternoon. “I never saw such a cow.”

“She’s certainly something unusual,” his mother answered. “I’m sorry for her, and I’m sorry we have to lose her milk. But now that her calf’s gone, I wish she’d forget him and act like other cows. Maybe she will—I rather think she will when she dries up.”

But Specklesides did not dry up. Though her milk was much reduced in quantity from what it had been in Frizzly’s lifetime, that was mainly from her refusal to graze.

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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Once she came home at the night milking-time, and they shut her up in the pen, leaving her to spend the night with the other cows. She did not jump out; but she seemed very restless, and bawled loudly and constantly all night long. They did not keep her in the pen again.

For several days longer the cow came to the pen from time to time to be milked. Then she wandered away, and day after day passed without bringing her back. Both the family and the neighbors speculated as to what had become of her.

Late one night, more than a week after the cow had last been seen, a party of scouts returned to the fort, and Mr. Dayberry came with them. From being awake late, the family slept till broad daylight next morning. They were aroused by Marzee Wilkins's voice calling excitedly, almost screaming, from the cow-pen:

"Thad! Thad Dayberry! Run out here just as quick as you can! Run out here and see what Specklesides has brought home!"

Springing from the trundle-bed, the boy jerked on his buckskin pantaloons, slipped the buckskin "gal-luses" over his shoulders, and was off for the cow-pen. Soon his voice was heard calling loudly, excitedly:

"Pa—ma—children—everybody! Run out here just as quick as you can, and see what Specklesides has brought home!"

Thad was not easily excited. But his voice was so charged with excitement now that the whole family were soon up and dressed and out at the cow-pen. All the Wilkinse were already there.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Well, now, don’t that beat everything!” exclaimed Mr. Dayberry, after staring a few moments at the cow.

Specklesides was standing near the bars, and a hump-shouldered little animal, of about the same size and age as Frizzly, was sucking her as hard as he could. The cow, with a satisfied look on her face, was licking the little fellow; and he was switching his stubby tail in a way to express delight both with his breakfast and with the licking.

“Pa, what in the world is that funny thing?” exclaimed little Carrie Dayberry.

“That’s a calf, Carrie—a buffalo calf.”

“And where did Specklesides find it, pa?”

It was Mrs. Wilkins that answered: “As to that, you’ll have to ask Specklesides, child.”

The cow and calf were driven into the pen, and the calf was left there during the day, with the other calves. The news quickly spread that the Dayberrys’ disconsolate cow had brought home a young buffalo; and during the day probably every person in the fort came for a look at the little humpback. The younger children surrounded the pen and gazed at him by the hour.

While nobody would ever know certainly just how the cow had come to find and take up with the little buffalo, the explanation was not hard to surmise.

Thirty or forty miles farther west, and not far beyond the Cross Timbers, began the unsettled wilderness. There buffaloes could nearly always be found. Some of the animals occasionally strayed down into the settlements, often to get shot. Probably the mother of this calf had been killed, and the calf had wandered

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## FRIZZLY'S GOING AND HUMPY'S COMING

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away. Finally, by some lucky accident, the motherless calf and the calfless cow had met, and adopted each other, to their mutual satisfaction, and even delight.

No more wandering or grieving for Specklesides after that. Whether she believed that the little buffalo was Frizzly come to life, or her strong mother instinct had merely driven her to adopt the orphan, could, of course, only be guessed. But from this time on she seemed perfectly contented.

Very glad were the Dayberrys for the cow's sake, and also to have their best milker again. They kept the calf in the pen in the daytime. Specklesides came home to the little buffalo as regularly as she had to her own calf, and seemed fully as fond of him—fonder if possible. Soon her gaunt sides filled out, and she was giving as much milk as ever. Now the cow-bell was buckled on her neck again.

The little buffalo was an object of general curiosity in the fort, and especially to the younger boys and girls. They soon named him Humpy. And they never seemed to tire of watching the little crooked-back as he played with the other calves after the night milking, racing here and there. Sometimes they played just outside the fort, and sometimes in the very square.

It was only a few days after the coming of Humpy that Charley Dick and Thad left Fort Blocker for a two-weeks' absence, during which they would pass through some very exciting experiences.



## XI

### AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

THAD, how would you like to go with me over to Uncle Dan Bedford's and help me herd his sheep for a while?"

"For how long, Charley Dick?"

"While Uncle Dan's out on the scout. About two weeks I reckon it'll be. Uncle Dan had a herder hired, but the feller got tired and went back down into Fannin County, where he'd come frum. Herdin' sheep by yourself is the lonesomest, tiresomest work that ever was. I know—I've tried it. But two of us together could have a bully time."

"That we could!" agreed Thad. "But I doubt mightily if pa and ma will let me go. I almost know they won't for as long as two weeks."

"S'pose you go and ask 'em, Thad. Uncle Dan sent word for me to git some other boy to come with me if I could. He'll pay us big, Uncle Dan will—pay us in wool. That's the main thing that's takin' me. I'm needed here, but ma needs the wool worse. She says if she don't git another piece of cloth in the loom before long, the patches will be three deep on me—if there's

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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anything left to patch with." Charley Dick gazed down at his patched and repatched knees, and then felt the seat of his faded, homespun pantaloons, where a big, freshly dyed homespun patch was clinging.

At the first mention of wool, Thad's face had brightened hopefully. Obtaining wool enough to weave cloth for the family's clothes during the coming winter was, he knew, one of his mother's present worries. She, too, was eager to get busy with her cards and wheel, and later with her loom.

This conversation had taken place at the spring. On coming back to the square, Charley Dick stopped at Thad's door and set down his water-bucket. Then the two boys put the momentous question.

As Thad had foreseen, both his father and his mother were unwilling for him to leave the fort for so long. But the wool wages changed their minds. Mr. Dayberry would not have to go scouting for about two weeks yet, and Thad would not be greatly needed at home.

"All right," said Charley Dick, after the details of the matter had been arranged. "I'll be ready to start just as soon as I can eat my dinner." He caught up his bucket of water and hurried away homeward.

An hour and a half later the two boys were mounted and riding out of the fort, Thad on his young horse, Ped, and Charley Dick on Bob. Many cautions and warnings to be ever on their guard for Indians were ringing in their ears. As they were passing out of the square, between the two corner houses, a girl appeared in the door on their left.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Good-by, Marzee! Look after Humpy while I’m gone!” Thad called back.

“Good-by, Thad—and Charley Dick! I will if the little rascal will let me!” she answered.

Charley Dick’s uncle lived over beyond Clear Creek, at the far edge of what was known as Willa Walla Valley. His house stood several miles from Fort Blocker, and a few miles in the Cross Timbers. Willa Walla was a wooded valley, without a creek to drain it. After rainstorms the water ran wherever it could.

As the two boys were riding up Blocker, and after they had passed Parson Witt’s place, Thad glanced at the gun slung to Charley Dick’s saddle-horn and inquired:

“Well, did that shooting star fetch along your rifle at last?”

Charley Dick made a wry face. “Naw! This is pap’s rifle.” Soon he added, with some resentment in his tones: “Shootin’ stars ain’t what some folks thinks they air. They shoot and shoot, but never hit anything! Hain’t got much use for ’em myself. Fact is, they’re not much punkins. Feller that figgers on a shootin’ star fetchin’ ’em things is leanin’ on a broken stick.”

“I’ve never tried any yet,” the other boy remarked. “I’ve never seen one since I told you I would.”

“Then, don’t. I’ve tried ’em, and mighty little good it done me. I’m through with ’em, for good and all I guess. I’ve got to find some better way to git hold of a rifle.”

“Ma says that shooting-star business is all foolishness.”

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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“And your ma’s just right. Foolishness it is. I give one star a good, fair chance to fetch along sumpn for me; but the onery thing just sneaked off like a suck-aig dog with his tail between his laigs, and never done me a hand’s turn. Never so much as fetched me a ramrod or a box of caps, let alone a rifle with double triggers! Don’t say shootin’ star to me! I’m down on ’em.”

After following up the Blocker Creek valley till they came to Mr. Dayberry’s farm, they struck across the high prairie to the west and at length entered the Cross Timbers. It was near the middle of the afternoon when they rode up to where Charley Dick’s uncle lived.

Mr. Bedford had been one of the first settlers here, and had better improvements than most of these pioneers could boast of. And he was better prepared to defy the savages. All his buildings were surrounded by a stockade—a wooden wall twelve feet high.

The two boys hitched their horses to trees, then opened the gate and went in. Thad had never been here before, but he was soon acquainted with Mrs. Bedford and the girls. Charley Dick’s uncle was now over near the edge of the prairie, at what was called the Catamount Branch sheep-camp. He had left word for Charley Dick to come on over there.

Mrs. Bedford detained them till she could cook provisions enough to last them two or three days. These she put into a haversack, which Thad tied behind his saddle. Then the boys mounted and rode away.

Charley Dick had been at the sheep-camp often before, and had no trouble finding it. The place was out on the prairie, half a mile or more from the edge of the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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forest. In years past some settler had built a one-room cabin at the top of a high hill which sloped steeply down to a branch—Catamount Branch. The cabin had long been abandoned, and Mr. Bedford had built a big pen near it for his sheep. They were kept out here most of the time, especially during the spring and summer season. His flock now numbered about two hundred and fifty head.

From the house a path led down the hill-side to the branch, where a pretty spring bubbled out from under the bank. Most of the first houses in every new country are built near springs. It was from the running stream below the spring that the flock was commonly watered.

Dismounting, the boys entered the house and hung their sack of provisions over a peg. On a shelf by the door was a water-bucket, with a gourd in it. Besides these things, a canteen was hanging against the wall, a skillet and a frying-pan were on the hearth, by the fireplace, and a roll of quilts and blankets lay in a back corner, on the puncheon-floor.

Afterwards the boys went out and walked around the rail-pen. Charley Dick remarked:

“That’s the kind of a fence you hear about.”

“What kind? What do you mean?”

“Why, the kind that’s pig-tight, horse-high and bull-strong. Made it that a way to keep the wolves out, Uncle Dan did. It don’t al’ays keep ’em out, though.”

The sheep and their owner could be seen half a mile or so away on the prairie. The boys soon mounted and rode on out there. They found Mr. Bedford sitting on the ground, with a dog lying close by. His saddled

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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horse, with lariat trailing, was grazing fifty yards away.

“Well, got here, have you, boys?” the man remarked, springing to his feet.

“Yes, here we air, Uncle Dan. And I’ve fetched Thad Dayberry along to help me herd.”

“Mighty good idy, that. Glad you brought ’im. If you’d come by yourself, we’d have had to move the flock over close to home. But I’d lots ruther leave ’em here. Reckon you two won’t be skeered to stay out here, will you?”

“Skeered! Not us, Uncle Dan. We’ll knock along all right—won’t we, Thad?”

“Guess we will.”

“And you’ll know what to do if the red men come, won’t you?”

“You’re mighty right we will!” grinned Charley Dick.

And Thad added: “We’ll jump on our horses and scratch heel-dust in their eyes!”

“That’s the caper!” chuckled the man. “Never mind about the sheep. The reds may scatter ’em fur and wide, but they ain’t noways likely to do ’em so overly much rale damage. Anyhow, a boy’s worth more than a sheep. ’Twouldn’t be the first time this flock has been scattered by the red boogers, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” answered Charley Dick.

“Whatever you do, boys, don’t both go off and leave the sheep at the same time, ’specially at night. It’s even worse while they’re in the pen than if they was foot-loose. Out on the open prairie they’d have a chance to

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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run for their lives. But shut up in the pen, no tellin' how many throats the wolves would cut if they got a whole night at 'em."

"We'll stay with 'em day or dark, shower or shine," Thad promised.

The flock's owner now gave the boys specific instructions as to how to take care of the sheep—when to drive them out to grass, when to water them, and when to pen them for the night. Then he mounted his horse.

"I've got orders to ride with the scouts to-morr' mornin'. I'll be gone two weeks, and maybe a few days longer. I'm dependin' on you boys not to desert the sheep till I come to relieve you, or send somebody."

"We'll be right here when you come back, Uncle Dan, unless we have to skedaddle from redskins."

"All right. Then I'll leave you two and Watch in full charge. Keep your horses saddled when you're away from the house. When you eat up what victuals you've got, one of you will have to ride over to the house for more."

He trotted away toward home. The young herders sat in their saddles till he was out of sight. Then they unslung their rifles, dropped their lariats loose, and dismounted.

First they took a stroll around the grazing flock. Later they sat down in the shade of a lone hackberry bush and talked. When the sun was only about an hour high, they and the dog went round the sheep and started them toward the cabin; but they allowed them to graze back. Sunset found the flock watered and penned for the night.

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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As darkness settled down, the two young shepherds could not help feeling lonely; the more so after living in lively, noisy Fort Blocker. The nearest settler was now a few miles away. They sat on a bench by the door and ate their supper from their haversack, tossing bones and scraps and pieces of dried beef to the dog.

After hanging their provision-sack back on its peg, they went down to the spring for a bucket of fresh water. Later they sat in the door, listening to the cries of the whippoorwills, to the barking and howling of wolves, and to the quarrelsome screaming of two wild-cats down in a thick tract of woods on the far side of the branch. Boys unaccustomed to such sounds might have felt nervous; but Thad and Charley Dick had been rocked to sleep in their cradles to this music, and they scarcely noticed it now. There were real dangers enough here, without worrying over things that would not really harm them.

When sleep-time came, they unrolled the quilts and blankets and made their bed on the floor. Watch was lying just outside the door, on the saddle-blankets. Being more or less anxious about the sheep, the boys slept rather lightly, and were awake from time to time. But the night passed peacefully enough. Soon after sunrise the herders had eaten their breakfast and saddled their horses, and had the sheep grazing away from the pen.

All day long the two boys moved slowly about over the prairie, allowing the sheep to wander where they would. Their horses were kept saddled, and their rifles were seldom out of reach. At noon Charley Dick rode to the house for their sack of provisions and a canteen

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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of spring-water. Dusk found the sheep shut up in their pen, and the two young shepherds eating another cold supper on a bench by the cabin-door.

They went to bed earlier to-night, and slept more soundly. But well on in the night they awoke suddenly, to hear Watch growling and barking furiously.

“Some booger among the sheep, Charley Dick! Grab your gun and let’s get out and kill it!”

“I’m right with you, Thad!”

With their rifles held in readiness to shoot, the two threw open the board shutter and passed out. Watch seemed very much afraid, for they found him backed up against the door. But at their appearance he grew bolder and ran toward the pen. The boys followed.

On coming to the fence, they looked between the rails. Dimly, through a fog of dust, they could see the sheep still rushing round and round inside the pen. But no animal of prey was in sight. The boys moved on, following the fence around. By the time they reached the far side, they had convinced themselves that no wild animal was now inside the enclosure.

“Some big varmint’s been in there, but he’s already jumped the fence and gone. What do you reckon it was, Thad?”

“Don’t know. Wolf, maybe. Watch seems to think—”

Here the dog ran a few yards down the steep hill and began to bark toward some woods that grew along the branch.

“Somethin’ down there, shore’s you’re born, Thad! Let’s yell as loud as we can holler!”

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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There being nothing else to do, both began to yell suddenly, and a little later stopped as suddenly. And scarcely had the yelling ceased when both distinctly heard the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of a small bell. The sounds were moving down the branch.

“Shucks! What big fools we’re makin’ of ourselves!” exclaimed Charley Dick. “Only somebody’s calf runnin’ off!”

“Does sound just like a calf-bell, don’t it? Or a sheep-bell. But I don’t see why Watch should rave and tear around like he does, just because somebody’s belled calf comes about.”

“Me neither. But no tellin’ what some dogs will do.”

“But the sheep, Charley Dick. You could put a calf right in the pen with ’em, and they wouldn’t mind it a bit.”

“Oh, sheep—they hain’t got any sense to speak of! Guess they couldn’t see the calf very plain, and they just mistook it for some varmint that eats sheep—a wolf, or some such hungry booger.”

“Maybe so,” answered Thad. But he still seemed puzzled. “To me their bleating sounded for all the world like they were scared half to death.”

The boys soon went back to the cabin and lay down, though it was an hour later before they fell asleep again. Sunrise found them driving the sheep out to grass.

A peculiar thing they noticed during the day. One of the ewes was restless, and kept wandering here and there among the flock, bleating constantly.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Acts for all the world like she’d lost her lamb,” Charley Dick said. “Wonder where the little feller has slipped off to.”

“I don’t believe we’ve let any lambs stray away. Doubt if she ever had any lamb.”

But when the ewe came near, the boys could easily see that she had been accustomed to suckling her young.

“Lamb must have took up with some other yowe,” Charley Dick remarked. “She’ll find it before a great while, I guess.”

But the ewe did not find her lamb. And when the sheep were penned for the night she was still bleating constantly.

The hours of darkness came and went, and nothing unusual occurred. For dinner next day the boys ate the last of the provisions in their haversack. An hour or two later Thad mounted his horse and rode over to Mr. Bedford’s for a fresh supply.

Except for some dogs, the place was deserted. Thad went in and sat down on the porch to wait. He could not return to the sheep-camp without something to eat. The sun was low when Mrs. Bedford and the girls came home. They had been over to Chunky Joe Wilson’s, visiting.

“Why, Thad, are you here? I’d forgot that you or Charley Dick might come, or some of us would have staid at home. Will you have to go back to-night?” asked Mrs. Bedford.

“Yes, ma’am. Charley Dick would be lonesome by himself. And there’s nothing for ’im to eat—him and Watch.”

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## AT THE CATAMOUNT BRANCH SHEEP-CAMP

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“Then we must fly in to cooking, girls. We won’t keep Thad waiting a minute longer than we have to. You won’t be afraid to ride back after dark, will you, Thad?”

“No, ma’am; I’m not afraid of the dark—not as much as I am of daylight sometimes.”

“What times, Thad?”

“Why, Indian times, for one kind.”

The boy ate his supper while Mrs. Bedford was putting the cooked provisions into the haversack. And it was thick dusk when, with the sack tied behind his saddle, he mounted Ped and started back to the sheep-camp.

By the time he had reached Clear Creek, the night was as dark as it would ever be. He had crossed the creek and was following a dim road through the thickly-wooded bottom-land beyond, when his horse stopped and began to snort.

Thad tried to peer ahead, but there was not light enough for him to see anything distinctly. He also listened, but his ear failed to detect any suspicious sound. Now he struck his bare heels against the horse’s sides.

But, instead of advancing, Ped only snorted more loudly and moved backward a step or two.

Again Thad leaned forward and tried to peer into the thick shadow. He also loosed his rifle from the saddle-horn. He, too, was now feeling some alarm. Indians might have heard him coming and be lying in wait by the road-side.

If the night had been less dark or the woods less

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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dense, he would have ridden around the suspicious spot. He was thinking seriously of trying to make a circuit anyway, when the slight tinkling of a small bell somewhere just ahead relieved his fears.

“Oh, move on here, Ped, you scary rascal!” he said aloud. “You’re getting too scary for any use! Things have come to a pretty pass when you’re afraid to go by somebody’s belled calf!”

Thad now fastened his rifle again, and took the quirt from the saddle-horn. Not till Ped had received several sharp raps would he go forward. Even then he advanced with his head held high, and snorting and trembling.

While Thad was still using both heels and quirt to urge the frightened horse on, the tinkle-tinkle of the calf-bell sounded again. Now the boy started and almost gasped. For the bell seemed to be somewhere up in the air. Before he could recover from his wonder, there was another tinkle, this time unmistakably in the tree-top just over his head.

“Who ever heard tell of a calf that climbed trees?” he asked himself, in hopeless bewilderment.

He raised his eyes, but could see nothing. Then he started to unslung his rifle. But the next moment he was almost unseated by a terrific bound of his horse! The bell jangled in his ear, and something hot seemed to burn his shoulder as a dark form shot by him!



## XII

### THAT STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

GO it, Ped! The Booger Man's after us!" cried Thad, as he urged his already running horse to greater speed.

But Ped needed no urging. Of his own accord he was doing his best to get away from that frightful belled thing, whatever it was, that had tried to leap down on both horse and rider. As the young nag bounded away along the narrow, gloomy road at reckless speed, Thad kept trying to look over his shoulder. He was fully expecting to discover some horrible monster in swift pursuit. Nothing could be seen in the dark; but not once did the boy pull rein.

The horse was still going at the same speed, when suddenly something seemed to grab hold of Thad, and it almost dragged him backwards out of the saddle! In his wild excitement and terror the boy believed that the same monster had followed him and seized him again, fully intent upon devouring him. And the horse must have thought likewise, for he tore along more recklessly than ever.

When at length they had reached open woods, where

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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there was some light, Thad looked back. No living thing could be seen, and the boy partly recovered from his panic. Now he loosed his rifle and made ready to fight for his life.

In a few minutes, to the boy's great relief, they passed from the forest to the prairie. Still Thad glanced behind him often. A few hundred yards farther on he left the road and struck across the prairie. Three-quarters of a mile more, at the same speed, and he could make out the cabin and the sheep-pen ahead. When he dashed up to the cabin, the door was shut, and only Watch was outside to receive him.

Quickly a rifle-barrel was pushed out between the logs, and a high-pitched but very determined voice from the inside challenged Thad:

"Halt! Who comes there?"

"It's nobody but me, Charley Dick! You needn't"—Thad paused to glance behind him—"be afraid."

The clapboard door-shutter swung outward on its rawhide hinges, and Charley Dick's figure appeared in the doorway.

"What in the world's the matter, Thad? Redskins after you?"

"No, but—

"Then, what do you mean by comin' tearin' along like you's goin' to ride right over the house? You skeer a body out of a year's growth!"

"Was something after me, Charley Dick! You better believe there was! Mighty nigh caught me, too. It got my cap and powder-horn! But for the life of me I don't know what the thing was."

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## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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Charley Dick stepped outside with his gun. "But what do you think it was, Thad?"

"That I can't even guess, unless it was—was the—the Bad Man—the Booger Man."

"The Booger Man!" gasped the boy on the ground, with a frightened glance around. "What would make the Booger Man git after you, Thad? You been doin' sumpn—sumpn wicked?"

"No, I've not—no such thing!" Thad's tones trembled with indignation. "I don't swear, nor chew tobacco, nor tell lies, nor—nor— You know I don't, Charley Dick."

"Yes, I know. But what would the Booger Man be doin' after you, Thad? Looks to me like he'd git after somebody that cusses and does all them kind of wicked things."

"So it looks to me. There was a grievance in Thad's voice, as if he had been unjustly treated.

"But what makes you believe it was the Booger Man, Thad? What did he do to you?"

Thad related his experiences as truthfully as he could. "And before Ped had run very far, the booger caught up with me, and jumped up and almost pulled me out of the saddle!" he declared. "If Ped hadn't outrun 'im, guess the awful creature would have devoured both of us alive. Now if that wasn't the Old Scratch, just tell me what it was, Charley Dick!"

The boy on the ground considered the matter well before replying. He was less excited than his friend.

"I've never yit heard tell that the Old Scratch wears a calf-bell," he finally said.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Neither have I. But what else could it have been? About the only thing that wears a little bell is a calf or a colt or a sheep. And you know as well as I do, Charley Dick, that such animals as that can’t climb a tree. And even if they could, you wouldn’t catch ’em jumping down on top of folks—not if they could help it.”

“That’s so—that’s all so,” admitted the other. “Guess it must have been some animal we’ve never heard tell of, me and you, Thad. But didn’t you fetch us some victuals? I’m mighty nigh starved.”

“Yes, I brought plenty to eat.”

Thad turned in the saddle till he could untie the sack. Then he handed it down. Dismounting, he leaned his rifle against the house and unsaddled his horse. Later he led the horse along the brow of the hill to a place where the sheep had not been. Horses do not like to graze after sheep. There he lariatied him for the night, driving down his stake-pin with a stone.

Returning to the cabin, he found Charley Dick and Watch eating their belated supper. It was a good while afterwards when the two boys shut and fastened the door, and lay down on their not very soft bed. Both were somewhat excited, and they did not sleep as soundly as usual. At length Charley Dick awoke, to see his friend standing in the open doorway.

“What you doin’ up there, Thad?”

“Looking.”

“Lookin’! Lookin’ for what?”

“Charley Dick”—Thad spoke in awed tones—“I’ve thought of something.”

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## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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“What?”

“That belled booger wasn’t the Old Scratch at all. It was some creature that eats sheep, as well as people and horses. And it’s been here—right here at this very place.”

“When—where?” Charley Dick sprang up from the pallet excitedly and began to grope for his gun.

“I don’t mean to-night. Night before last it was.”

“Why, I didn’t know a thing about it!”

“Yes, you did, too. Don’t you recollect? When we yelled we heard something running off with a calf-bell on, and we thought it must be somebody’s calf. And we wondered why the sheep had got so badly frightened just because a calf had come around. But it wasn’t a calf at all—any more than Watch is a calf. It was that very same belled monster that tried its hardest to jump down on top of me to-night.”

Charley Dick was startled. “That’s just what it was, Thad! Why didn’t we think of that sooner? It seemed strange that them there sheep would go to actin’ up like that, and all for a calf. Yessirree! That belled booger was here tryin’ to kill a sheep. And he did kill a lamb, and packed it off when he went. That was what ailed that old yowe. It was her lamb the varmint got.”

The knowledge that the mysterious belled monster of the tree-tops had actually raided the sheep-pen was so exciting that for an hour or two the boys could not sleep a wink. Before lying down they shut the door and fastened it securely; and when at last they did sleep, both slept with their hands on their rifles.

They were awake and up by the time they could see.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Why, Thad, your shirt’s tore, and your shoulder’s bloody!”

“Thought my shoulder felt sore. I recollect now. That booger must have clawed me as he went down.”

The wounds—for there were several—proved to be only scratches. But when Thad brought Ped to the cabin, the horse, too, was found to have several claw-marks on one hip.

“No wonder you got over ground like a good fellow, Ped!” The boy patted the horse’s neck. “If you hadn’t jumped just when you did, I might have made a meal for that big varmint.”

After the herders had got the sheep out and started to grazing, Thad, who was bare-headed, announced:

“Charley Dick, believe I’ll ride back toward Mr. Bedford’s and see if I can’t pick up my cap, and maybe my powder-horn. Don’t guess that booger ate them, or carried them off either. I don’t want to be going about bare-headed; and I don’t like to lose my powder-horn and all that powder if I can help it.”

“If you cain’t find your cap, better ride on over to Uncle Dan’s, Thad. Maybe the folks can hunt up one of Uncle Dan’s old caps or old hats for you. And you’d better take my powder-horn. That belled creecher might be waitin’ for you ag’in.”

“No, I won’t rob you of all your powder. You might need some yourself. But I’ll borrow a few loads if you don’t mind.”

Thad took out of his ammunition-bag a piece of cloth used for “patching,” and Charley Dick poured some powder into it. This Thad wrapped up carefully

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## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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and placed in the bottom of the bag. Then he rode away.

An hour or two later he returned, galloping on out to where Charley Dick and the sheep were. He was wearing his cap, and his powder-horn was again hanging by his side.

“Picked ’em up in the road,” he explained. “And I don’t guess that belled varmint had a thing in the world to do with tearing ’em off. I couldn’t make out any tracks. I just ran against a thorny old black-jack limb, and the limb raked my cap off, and broke my powder-horn string.”

“And was that other all a mistake, too? Wasn’t there any big booger with a bell that tried to jump d. xn on top of you, Thad?”

“Yes, there was—of course there was! I know. I rode on and found his tracks in the road.”

“And what did they look like—the booger’s tracks?” the other boy wanted to know, eagerly.

“Well, he had about the biggest foot and the longest claws of any beast of prey I ever saw.”

Charley Dick glanced around, as if expecting the animal to appear. “Tell me all about it, Thad.”

“Not much else to tell. I found Ped’s tracks where he’d jumped with me—jumped to get out of the booger’s way. Then I saw where the booger himself had struck the ground, after fetching Ped and me that rake as he went down.”

“And what did the tracks look like?”

“Just big paws, I’d say. And the claws on ’em must have been nearly half as long as my finger.”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Whe-e-e-ew!” whistled Charley Dick. “And did you find any more—any more tracks?”

“Not many. The varmint made another jump as soon as he struck the ground—to dodge Ped’s heels, I’d guess. And that jump must have landed ’im out of the road and onto the leaves. After that I couldn’t track ’im any further.”

“Did you look up into the tree-top to see whether he’d clumb back to his same place?”

“You’d better believe I did, Charley Dick! I didn’t ride under any tree till I’d made sure what was roosting up among the limbs. But he wasn’t anywhere around there.”

During the rest of the day the young shepherds talked of little but the belled monster of the tree-tops. What the animal was like they could only guess; but in their imaginations he assumed various shapes, every one of them hideous. Both declared that they would not do any more traveling through the woods after dark, and especially none through the woods of the Clear Creek bottom.

That the mysterious beast of prey had already paid a visit to the sheep-pen was worrying the boys. After getting one lamb there, the beast, if hungry, would be pretty sure to come back for another lamb.

With that conviction the young shepherds began to feel not a little uncomfortable as night drew near. They watered the flock rather earlier than usual, and had the last sheep in the pen and the gate fastened while the sun was still shining. One other thing they had done—caught the bell-wether as he passed through

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## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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the gate and taken his bell off. Now if they heard a ringing they would know that the sound was not made by the sheep.

After staking their horses out on the prairie, they returned to the cabin, took up their guns and the water-bucket, and went down the path to the spring. On returning with the water, they sat on the bench outside and ate their supper. Later, after putting their haversack away, they again sat on the bench, with their guns leaning against the wall, and talked.

“How long you been livin’ in Texas, Thad?”

“Always. Born here. Never lived anywhere else.”

“That so? I was born away back in old Alabam’. Been livin’ out here most of my life, though.”

“Can you recollect anything about Alabama?”

“Not much. We lived almost on the Tennessee line, they say. Part of pap’s farm was in Tennessee, but the house was in Alabamy. Thing I recollect plainest was hearin’ the Mussel Shoals.”

“Did you ever see ’em—the shoals?” asked Thad, eagerly.

“Guess maybe I did. But I don’t recollect it. We lived a good many miles from there. But on right still mornin’s we could hear ’em roarin’, just as plain.”

“They’re in the Tennessee River.”

“Yes. But how did you know that, Thad?”

“Ma has told me about ’em, and pa, too. Ma’s read about ’em, but pa’s been there and seen ’em. Ma has read a lot. She used to teach school before she got married.”

“Did your pap ever teach school, too, Thad?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“No. Pa hasn’t been to school so overly much himself, let alone teaching anybody else. Ma laughs and tells ’im he couldn’t teach a cat to meow or a dog to bark. Pa says there’s no need to; says most of the cats meow too much already, and all the dogs bark too much, especially the Fort Blocker dogs. Do you recollect anything about your trip from Alabama to Texas?”

“Not to speak of, Thad. I can remember when our wagons crossed the Mississippi River on a steam ferryboat. But that’s about all. I cain’t hardly recollect when we first stopped in this country.”

“Are you any akin to the family of Sheegogs that live down there below the fort—Louis and Dick and Jenny?”

“Not akin to speak of—none that we know of. All the Sheegogs is some little akin, they say. At first my folks used to call me Dick. But after we come out here close to the other Sheegogs and their Dick, they took to callin’ me Charley Dick, so’s everybody would know which Dick was meant. Them other Sheegogs, they didn’t come from Alabamy. They’re from Tennessee. Where did your folks move frum to Texas, Thad?”

“From Missouri.”

“From Missouri? How fur away is that?”

“I don’t know. A thousand miles, maybe. It took pa and ma a few weeks to come.”

“Is it as fur to Missouri as it is to Illinois?”

“Almost. Illinois is on the other side of the river and Missouri on this side. Just the Mississippi between.”

“Harrison Hendricks, he come from Illinois—him

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## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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and Alvretty and all their folks. And there's a lot more of the Hendrickses besides these. Harrison's got a uncle that's a big lawyer, they say. Harrison was named after 'im. Lives down in Dallas or Fort Worth, or some'r's—Harrison's Uncle Harrison does. He's been up here, though, the big lawyer has. Come to visit Judge Everts's folks, that used to live just acrosst the divide from your pa's place, on Clear Creek."

"Yes, I know. Everybody calls it the Judge Everts place yet."

"Uh huh. Moved away a year or two ago, the jedge did. They was from Indiany, the Evertses was. Had a girl livin' at home named Trudy. They had another daughter, too. Lawyer Hendricks, he married her—Harrison's Uncle Harrison. That was before any of 'em come out here, I guess. My, but don't I wish I could make a big lawyer when I grow up! I'd marry a jedge's daughter, too, and live in town instid of in a fort, and make dead oodles of money—till my pockets would be fit to bust with it."

"Maybe you can make a big lawyer."

"Not as anybody knows of I cain't! Ain't smart enough. Takes a pile of brains to make a lawyer, let alone a big lawyer. Big lawyers is about the smartest folks that ever was, I guess. They can do things that nobody else cain't do."

"What things?" inquired Thad.

"Well, it's this a way. Some feller he's done sumpn dreadful bad. They've got 'im in jail, and he thinks to his soul they're goin' to hang 'im. So he up and sends for the big lawyer. And the big lawyer he

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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up and makes a speech to the jedge and the jury. He makes a motion with one hand"—Charley Dick stood up and made a wild flourish with his left hand—"and proves it wasn't the way it was at all. Then he makes a motion with his other hand"—Charley Dick made another wild flourish, with his right hand—"and proves it was some other way, right plumb differ'nt from what it was. And then—"

"But how does he do that?" demanded Thad.

"Now if I just knowed that, I'd be a big lawyer myself! You'll have to ask the big lawyer. But he does it all right. The jury-fellers, they git together, off by theirselves, and then they say: 'Bein' as it wasn't the way it was at all, but that other way, right plumb differ'nt, guess we'll have to let the feller go.' And the jedge he up and says: 'Yes, bein' as it wasn't the way it was at all, but that other way, right plumb differ'nt, it's all right to let the feller go.' So they up and turn 'im loose, the feller that thought to his soul he was bound to be hung. And he's so glad he takes out his purse and gives the big lawyer all the gold and silver he's got. Then he borries some silver and gold from his kinfolks and gives 'im that. And just like as not he borries some more from his wife's kinfolks and gives 'im that, too. And he's got more money than he knows what to do with, the big lawyer has. My, but don't I wish I was smart enough to make a big lawyer! It would be hard cash right down in my pocket." And Charley Dick sighed a great sigh.

When they grew sleepy, the boys went in and fastened the door, then lay down on their pallet, with their

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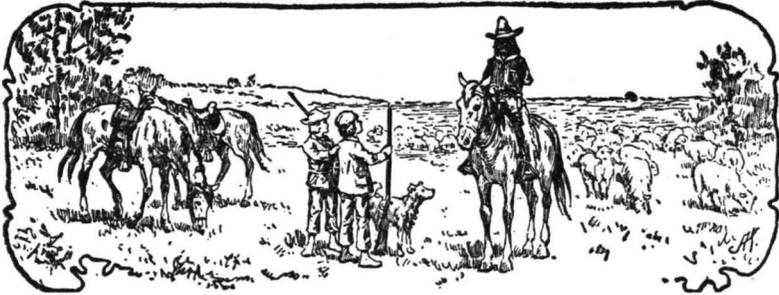
## STRANGE MONSTER OF THE TREE-TOPS

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guns by their sides. Far along in the night they awoke.

Again a deafening tumult was raging outside. Watch, backed up against the door, was growling and barking savagely. From the big pen came the noise of terrified trampling and bleating, as the sheep rushed round and round in a vain attempt to escape. And through all the wild commotion could be heard the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of a little bell!



### XIII

#### THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

WHAT—what had we better do, Thad?" quavered Charley Dick, as he felt for his gun.

"Why, get out there as quick as ever we can and try to kill the booger!"

"But he might—might jump onto us and—and eat us instid of a sheep!" It seemed a dreadful thing to have to get out in the dark and fight that mysterious beast with a bell on.

"What have we got guns for?"

"But s'pose we shot and missed! Hard to take good aim when you can't see the sights."

"But we mustn't miss. And we must shoot one at a time, so's to keep one gun loaded and ready. Wish now I'd brought pa's six-shooter too."

As soon as he was wide awake, Charley Dick's courage revived. Guns firmly grasped, the two boys unfastened the door, threw it wide open and stepped out. To their relief, there was light enough for them to see pretty well.

Watch, evidently much afraid of the belled beast, had not dared to get away from the door. But with the

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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appearance of the boys he grew bolder and rushed off towards the pen, barking savagely.

In the sheep-pen that frightful commotion was still under way. The ringing of the bell indicated that the beast of prey was still among the sheep, chasing them round and round. Their terrified bleating was pitiful.

The boys ran to the pen. A belated moon had just risen above the eastern prairie. But between the shadow of the high fence—it was about seven feet high—and the fog of dust stirred up by the trampling sheep, there was not much light inside the pen. The boys climbed the fence till they could rest their guns across the top rail. Sometimes they could catch faint glimpses of the belled animal as he rushed after the sheep. To them he appeared frightfully large, but they could tell little as to what he looked like. And try as they would, it seemed impossible to get a sight on him, so swift were his movements.

“Let’s yell again! Maybe we can scare ’im out!” cried Thad. And scarcely were the words out of his mouth when both began to yell with all their might.

Presently a large-sized animal was seen to leap upon the fence from inside the pen. As he balanced himself for a few moments on the topmost rail, his figure was distinctly outlined against the bright eastern sky and the rising moon. In his mouth was a dead lamb, and under his neck hung a small bell, which was tinkling noisily.

Thad’s gun was already cocked. Hastily he ran his eye along the barrel and pressed the trigger. But just as the rifle cracked the lamb-stealer leaped to the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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ground, disappearing behind the fence. Then the bell tinkled rapidly as the brute fled down the hill toward the branch.

Knowing that the dreaded creature was in full retreat, the boys jumped down and ran round to that side of the pen, hoping to get another shot. But there was no moonlight down there as yet; and though they kept hearing the bell, they caught not another glimpse of the animal. Watch ran half-way down the hill, barking after the beast.

For a few minutes Thad and Charley Dick continued to hear the bell. But it sounded farther and farther off; for the animal was running away down the branch.

“What was it, Thad—that big varmint?”

“Don’t know for certain, but he looked more like a co’gar than anything else.” Thad was now reloading his gun.

“A co’gar! But what would a co’gar be doin’ with a bell on?”

“Hard telling. But he’s belled just the same. We saw ’im—we both saw ’im, bell and all, didn’t we?”

“Yes, saw the bell as plain as could be, and heard it, too. But who ever heard tell of a belled co’gar?”

“I never did before. But there was a belled co’gar here, whether there ever was another one or not. Wish I knew how the booger got that bell on his neck.”

“So do I. But I cain’t even guess. He packed off a lamb, didn’t he?”

“That’s what he did! I wonder if he killed any he didn’t carry off. Let’s see.”

The two climbed the fence and dropped down into

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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the pen. All the sheep were huddled together at one side, against the fence. They were in a state of terror, and still bleating piteously. If there were any dead or wounded, they could not be discovered in the dim light. The boys talked to the sheep, and tried to quiet them.

“The varmint won’t come back to-night.”

“How do you know, Thad?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t guess he will. He won’t want any more to eat after he makes a supper of that lamb.”

“Maybe not. But he was a purty big co’gar. One lamb might not make more than half a mess for ’im.”

“Anyhow, if he comes back we’ll be ready for the booger. Now that we know for certain what we’ve got to fight, I’m not so much afraid. I never did knock over a co’gar. Never even got a shot at one. Never happened to see one when I had my rifle. But I wish—I wish to my soul I could kill one!”

Thad was thinking of what everybody, and particularly the boys and girls, would say if he should go back to the fort with a cougar-skin as a trophy; and more particularly of what his shy, soft-voiced little neighbor, Marzee Wilkins, would say.

“So do I,” agreed his fellow-herder.

Now the two climbed out of the pen and returned to the cabin. When their excitement had died out, Charley Dick lay down on their bed and fell asleep again. But Thad sat in the open doorway, with his own rifle lying across his lap, and his friend’s rifle leaning against the wall close by.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Day came at last, but not the cougar. The young shepherds were letting the sheep out of the pen as the sun appeared.

With a cougar raiding the sheepfold every night or two, the young herders did not find their task growing monotonous. Most of their time was spent discussing the best way of putting an end to that belled beast of prey. Late in the forenoon they noticed two horsemen approaching.

"Cattle-men, from their looks," Thad remarked.

"Yes. That one on the sorrel horse is Mr. Chisholm—John Chisholm," said Charley Dick.

"Hello, boys! How's the sheep business?" called out the genial John, as the two horsemen reined up near the grazing flock.

"Good as can be expected, I guess, Mr. Chisholm," answered Charley Dick.

"Varmints troublin' you any?"

Now Thad spoke up: "Yes, they are that. Co'gar carried off a lamb for us last night."

"A co'gar! Didn't you have any gun?"

"Yes. And I took a shot at 'im, too. But he grabbed up the lamb and was over the fence before I could take aim. So I must have missed. But we expect to salivate 'im next time he shows up around that sheep-pen!"

"That's what we do!" declared Charley Dick. Soon he added: "Somethin' mighty strange about that co'gar, Mr. Chisholm."

"What's that?"

"Why, he's got a bell on."

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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“A bell?”

“Yes, sir! He’s belled like a calf,” said Thad.

Chisholm turned to the man with him—one of his cowboys: “Bill, guess that varmint belongs to us, don’t he?”

“Ruther reckon we could claim ’im,” admitted the cowboy, with an expansive grin.

“What puzzles Charley Dick and me is how a co’gar could come to have a bell on,” Thad remarked.

“Maybe he et somebody’s bell-calf, beginnin’ at the tail,” suggested the cowboy. “And when he got through eatin’, his head was through the bell-collar.”

The young sheep-herders only grinned incredulously.

Soon Chisholm explained: “I can tell you how that bell got onto that varmint’s neck. Three or four of my cowboys was out one day, and they run across that brute. He was in a patch of trees and bushes out in the prairie, half a mile or so from any other woods. He’d killed somebody’s calf out there, the co’gar had, and stuffed himself with calf-meat till he was fit to bust his hide. He lit out for the big woods; but instead of shootin’ ’im, the boys took after ’im on their horses and roped ’im. After they’d got ’im down and stretched out, with one rope on his neck, another on his hind feet and another on his fore feet, they took it into their fool heads that they’d play a joke on that varmint. So they fastened the dead calf’s bell on the co’gar’s neck, then put my brand on ’im and turned ’im loose. Did you notice any half-circle C on his hip, boys?”

“Not light enough to make out brands, Mr. Chisholm,” laughed Charley Dick.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“And so that’s how the bell got on, is it?” remarked Thad. “I’d never thought of such a way.”

And Charley Dick said: “Me neither. Looks like the booger would claw the bell-collar in two and git shet of the bell.”

“Wasn’t any bell-collar,” the cowboy explained. “Bell was fastened on the calf’s neck with a piece of chain and some wire. And we up and used the same chain and wire to fasten it on the co’gar’s neck. He’ll have to claw a long time to claw that chain in two. We put that bell on to stay.”

“Where was that?” inquired Thad.

“Away up close to the Spanish Diggin’s, on Red River. More than twenty miles from here, it must have been,” the cowboy told them.

“They shift about, co’gars do,” Chisholm remarked. “When they’ve hunted out one part of the country, they move over to another part. If he works up an appetite for mutton, you boys will stand a fine chance to pack home his hide.”

“We’ll try mighty hard to. But he’s a fighter.” And Thad related his experience in the Clear Creek bottom.

Now the cowboy said: “You lads better look out for that ugly booger. He’s a whale of a brute. He could drag down a horse if he once got fastened on ’im.”

“Reckon it was my horse he was after that night instead of me?” asked Thad.

“Hard tellin’. It might have been.”

“Guess he was out for meat, and didn’t care a rap what kind—horse-meat or boy-meat,” said Chisholm.

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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"Maybe he would have liked a little of both for a change." The cowboy grinned.

The two men now made some inquiries concerning cattle, then rode on their way.

It was for this Chisholm and his brother that the great Chisholm Cattle Trail is said to have been named. Years after this the brothers removed to New Mexico, where they were engaged in a cattle-war that attracted the attention of the whole country. There the Chisholms were accused of doing many lawless things. If the charges were true, the two men must have gone wrong afterwards. For here in north Texas, where they got their start at cattle-raising, they were orderly, law-abiding men, of good reputation.

When the cattle-hunters were gone, the young herders had more to talk about. They penned the sheep early, and made ready to give the belled cougar a warm reception.

Now they stood guard all the night long, one sleeping while the other sat in the doorway, or walked about in the front yard. But that beast of prey, for prudence or some other reason, failed to show himself.

Next afternoon, while Thad and Charley Dick were strolling about over the prairie near the grazing flock, they saw a mounted negro approaching. When he came near enough, they could make out that he had but one arm.

"It's Lorin's' Jack," announced Charley Dick. "Everybody in this country knows Jack, and everybody likes 'im. The Lorin's live up there on the prairie above your pap's place, at the head of Blocker."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Yes, I know. I was up at their ranch once, with my pa. I didn’t see Jack there, but I noticed ’im ride by our house one day, before we moved down to the fort.”

“Howdy, boys! Howdy—howdy!” the black man greeted, with a smile that showed his white teeth, as his horse stopped and fell to grazing. He was a rather young fellow. He carried no gun, but wore a six-shooter at his belt.

A very black negro was Jack, with a broad nose and distinctly African features, but withal a rather handsome man. That was mainly due to his expression, however. For in spite of his misfortune, cheerfulness radiated from his countenance; and he was more intelligent-looking than most of his race. Thoroughly honest and reliable was one-armed Jack, and his frank, open countenance indicated the fact. That and his pleasant manners made friends for him wherever he went. Everybody who knew Jack liked him and spoke well of him.

The boys greeted the black man pleasantly, and were soon in conversation with him.

“How’s Mistah Bedfo’d’s sheep a-comin’ on?” the horseman soon inquired.

“They’re all right, Jack,” Charley Dick answered. “But we’re havin’ some trouble with a co’gar that likes mutton.”

Soon the two were eagerly narrating to the black man the whole story of their experiences with that belled beast of prey. They also repeated what Chisholm had told them as to how the cougar came to be wearing the bell.

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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Jack listened eagerly. "Dat's a dainjus boogah to fool wid," he commented, when Thad had told him of that leap in the dark. "Hit ain't too safe fo' a pusson to be ridin' froo de woods atter dahk any mo'."

Jack talked with the white boys a good while. He was out in search of a missing horse. After making some inquiries for the animal, he rode away.

"Do you know how he happened to lose his arm?" Thad inquired, while the black horseman was still in sight.

"Yes, I do. Everybody has heared that—everybody that's lived in this country very long. Mr. Lorin', his master, was to blame for Jack's arm bein' off."

"He was? By accident?"

"No. Whisky and meanness, mixed."

"Then he ought to have been strung up!" declared Thad, indignantly.

"Well, he wasn't strung up, Lorin' wasn't. But he was next thing to hung. He got knocked right plumb in the head and killed for it."

"He did! Who knocked 'im in the head?"

"Jack was the feller."

"And did they do anything to 'im—to Jack?"

"Not a thing. Well, I believe they did put 'im in jail for a day or two. But they turned 'im loose as soon as they found out for certain just how it had happened. Nobody blamed Jack, not even the Lorin' family. It was several years ago that it took place; but I can recollect it well enough."

"They thought Jack had a right to get even, did they?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Guess maybe they did. But Jack, he didn’t do it to git even. That’s the strange thing about it.”

“Then how did he come to do it?”

“Done it by accident. The way it all happened was this. They say Mr. Lorin’ was a purty nice man when he was sober, but as mean as the very Old Scratch when whisky got in ’im. And that was onct every so often. Well, one day he come home from town about half tight. Jack was just a big boy then, not quite grown, and full and runnin’ over with his mischief. Jack had got to devilin’ his sister Liz, and his master caught ’im at it. That made Lorin’ mad. Up he grabbed a big stick and struck Jack acrosst the arm with it—the left arm. I don’t know how bad Jack was hurt; but they didn’t do anything for the wound, and first thing anybody knowed it was—was— What do they call it, Thad? Sounds a right smart like fortified, but that’s not the word.”

“Mortified.”

“Yes, that’s it—mortified. Well, the long and short of it was, the doctor had to come and cut Jack’s arm off.”

“Did they do anything to Loring, Charley Dick?”

“That I don’t know. I never heared anybody say. I don’t even know whether all that happened out here, or ’way back in Mississippi, where the Lorin’s all come frum. But it happened. And Lorin’ got what was comin’ to ’im, too. That part I know about. It didn’t happen up there on their ranch, but down right close to your pap’s place. Just about a half a mile to the west.”

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## THE BELLED BEAST COMES AGAIN

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“Was it over there on the Loring Branch, where the old house place is?”

“That’s the very spot. That’s where Jack killed his master. The family lived there then. They’d settled there by mistake, I guess. After’ds they moved up to their own land, where their ranch is now. But the killin’ was at the old place.”

“I’ve been over there time and again. But how did it happen?”

“Well, Old Man Lorin’ come home from Gainesville one day, with some more whisky inside of ’im. Jack was at the woodpile, choppin’. Mighty strong in his right arm, Jack is. They say the stren’th of his two arms went into one. He can chop about as well as anybody; but he has to hold the axe by the end of the handle.”

“I know. I’ve seen a one-armed man chop.”

“Well, Lorin’ was just drunk enough to be foolish. So he must up and order Jack to chop faster. Jack chopped as fast as he could, but that didn’t please his master. Lorin’ got a board and went up behind Jack and give ’im a paddlin’. Sever’l times Lorin’ done that, and every time Jack would stop choppin’ to keep from hittin’ the drunk man with the axe. But purty soon, while Jack was choppin’ for dear life to keep from gittin’ beat, Lorin’ went slippin’ up behind ’im to paddle ’im ag’in. Jack failed to hear ’im that time. And just as the white man got clost enough to begin to paddle, back come Jack’s axe and hit ’im kerwhack on the head!”

“Goody! Goody! Goody! And the lick—?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Killed Lorin’ as dead as a door-nail.”

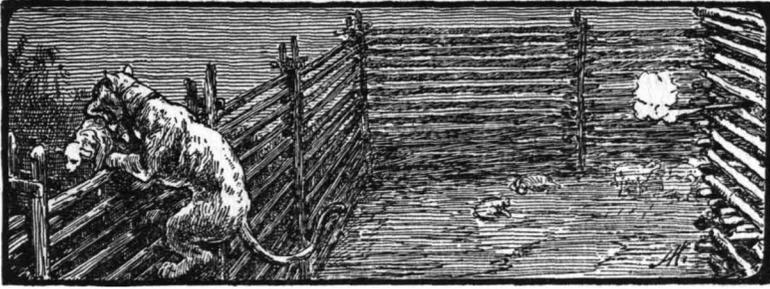
“Just what ought to have happened!”

“So all the folks said. Lorin’ got what he deserved, and not a soul was to blame for it but himself. Even the family all declared plain out it wasn’t Jack’s fault. Lorin is buried right over there on the Lorin’ Branch, in some woods.”

“How did they come to bury ’im away over there, by himself?”

“Guess maybe there wasn’t any graveyards here then. Anyhow, they buried ’im there, and—yander comes Jack back! Wonder what he wants this time.”

“He rides like he was excited! Something the matter—that’s plain to be seen. He’s bringing some kind of news!”



## XIV

### A FLASH IN THE PAN

EAGERLY the two white boys awaited the black man's coming. He was approaching at a gallop. They even walked out a few yards to meet him.

"What's the matter now, Jack?" called Charley Dick, almost as soon as the negro was within hearing.

"Foun' dat young hoss I's a-huntin' fo'!"

"And why didn't you bring 'im with you?" inquired Thad.

"Mighty good reason why! Dat bell co'gah o' yo'n done gawn an' et 'im 'bout half up!"

"Where—where was that?" cried Charley Dick, excitedly.

"And when did it happen?" Thad wanted to know.

"Right ober yanner in de aidge ob de woods. Las' night, guess hit must 'a' been."

Numerous other questions the excited young herders asked. Soon they mounted their horses and, leaving the flock in Watch's care, rode away with Jack for a look at the cougar's victim. The place was little more than half a mile distant, and almost in sight of the sheep.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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They found it just as Jack had said. The dead horse, partly devoured, was lying where he had given up his life. Following the horse's tracks backwards, the three soon came to where the cougar had begun the attack.

The beast of prey had been lying on the limb of a big oak, it appeared. While the horse was passing under the limb, the cougar had dropped down and fastened himself on his victim's back, just as he had tried to fasten himself on Thad's horse. The three had already seen wounds made by his claws in the horse's back and sides while he was tearing at the horse's throat. The woods were thick here, without much grass; and the tracks in the loose, sandy soil showed plainly where the horse had run and struggled till the loss of blood caused him to fall down and succumb to his savage assailant.

The whole story of the lying in wait, of the sudden, unexpected attack, and of the victim's death-struggles, was so graphically told by the signs that the boys and Jack had no trouble reading it. And what they read gave them a better idea of the belled brute's strength and fierceness.

"Now you see what you missed, Thad—or ruther what missed you," remarked Charley Dick.

"Yes, I do that. If the wind hadn't been right, so that Ped could smell the co'gar, just like as not the booger would have landed kerplump on top of me—ugh! Makes a fellow's blood run cold to think of it!"

For a few minutes longer the three stood by the half-devoured carcass and talked of the matter. Then

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## A FLASH IN THE PAN

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Jack mounted and rode on his way, while Thad and Charley Dick returned to the flock. The boys had stood much in awe of the cougar before. Now their fears were tenfold greater.

“Reckon the booger will come back to that dead horse to-night, Thad?” The two had dismounted near the sheep.

“Rather guess he will—unless he takes it into his head that he’d like a mess of mutton, for a change.”

“If he does come back there, maybe one of us could hide in a tree and take a pop at ’im.”

Thad shook his head decidedly. “That would work all right with some big booger that can’t climb. But with a brute that’s right at home among the tree-tops—not any in mine, thank you!”

But Charley Dick’s remark had given Thad an idea, and he kept turning it over in his head. Finally he mounted his horse and rode back to the cabin. There he spent an hour walking about in the empty sheep-pen, and planning what he would do with a big pile of unused rails lying outside, near the gate. On returning to the flock, he said to his fellow-herder:

“Now I know how we’ll fix Mr. Co’gar.”

“How—how’s that?” inquired Charley Dick, eagerly.

Thad explained his plan, and they spent the rest of the day discussing it. The cougar would be apt to go back for more horse-flesh the following night, and to-morrow would be early enough to prepare for his next visit to the sheep-pen.

Night came and passed without any disturbance. Next morning, as soon as the sheep had begun grazing,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Thad armed himself and rode over for a look at the dead horse.

It was impossible to tell whether the cougar had returned during the night; for a great flock of buzzards had discovered the carcass and were making a breakfast of it. Thad sat on his horse, watching the big, hungry fowls tearing the flesh. They seemed not much afraid of him. While riding away he noticed other buzzards coming to join the breakfast party.

“They won’t leave a thing but bare bones by night,” Thad told Charley Dick, after returning to the flock.

“And when Old Man Co’gar don’t find any more horse-flesh, he’ll make a bee-line for the sheep-pen and another fat lamb for supper—don’t you reckon he will, Thad?”

“I just as good as know he will. And we’ll be ready for ’im—won’t we, though!”

The sheep were kept in sight of the pen most of the day. And the two boys were busy at the pen. When they got through, the pile of rails near the gate had disappeared, and a tall, four-square rail-pen stood in the center of the sheep-pen. About seven feet above the ground, in the square pen, was a floor of rails; and the top, five or six feet higher, was covered over with a double layer of rails.

“But what if the big creecher tears a hole in the pen to git to you, Thad?” suggested Charley Dick, as they stood gazing at the open rail-structure.

“Let ’im tear! Before he can open a hole I’ll have ’im too dead to kick.”

The sheep, attended only by Watch, had grazed out

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## A FLASH IN THE PAN

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of sight by this time, and the herders mounted and rode after them. The sun was setting when they shut the flock in the big pen for the night.

It was dusk when the boys entered the sheep-pen, carrying their guns, and made their way among the sheep to their two-story square pen. Leaning their rifles against the rails, they climbed to the flat roof. An opening was now made, and through it Thad let himself down into the second story. Then Charley Dick closed the opening and climbed to the ground. Next he passed in Thad's rifle between the rails, and after it Thad's powder-horn and ammunition-bag.

"Now we'll see what will come to pass," Thad remarked. "I don't believe that belled booger can get to me; but if I don't happen to finish 'im the first shot, I'll want to load pretty quick."

"Maybe I'd better let you keep my rifle, Thad. Then you'll have two shots instid of only one."

"But what if the co'gar went to the house?"

"He won't be apt to. And I'll fasten the door, hard and fast."

"Not so fast that he couldn't claw it open. I wish we could both stay in here."

"We could. But who'd shut up the hole after we got in?"

"That would be hard. Guess one of us will have to stay out. But I do wish I could keep both rifles."

"I'll tell you, Thad. You can. If that belled varmint comes clawin' at the door, I'll holler to split my throat, and you can shoot 'im from where you air. You can see the door from up there, cain't you?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Of course I can, plainly enough. Yes, I can lay the booger out from here if you’ll let me know when he comes.”

“I’ll let you know—don’t fret. And Watch will, too.”

So Charley Dick returned to the cabin and shut himself in, while Thad, with the two rifles, made ready to keep watch.

For a time the boy shut up in the square pen stood gazing out between the rails. Later he sat down, and still later he lay down. The rough, sharp-edged rails made a hard, uneven bed; but Thad was no child of luxury. Though he warned himself that he must by all means keep awake, he fell asleep.

More than once during the night he awoke and sat up. But the sheep were always lying quietly; and everything seemed so peaceful that he would soon lie down again. And so the whole night passed away.

Two more days came and went, and two more nights Thad stood guard, protected by his rail-cage. But the belled cougar came not, and the sheep lay undisturbed on the dusty ground.

“Guess the varmint has changed his stamping-ground,” Thad remarked. “I’ll sleep in the cabin to-night.”

And he did. But some time during the night the two boys were awakened by the raging of the dog, and by another terrified panic among the sheep!

They got out in time to hear a bell running down the hill toward the woods, but not in time to get a shot at the cougar, or even to catch a glimpse of him.

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## A FLASH IN THE PAN

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They stood guard the rest of the night. When morning came, a dead sheep was found in the pen; and the plaintive bleating of a ewe meant that another lamb had been killed and carried off.

Thad gazed angrily at the dead sheep. "Wonder why that sneaking varmint don't show himself while I'm out here on guard."

"Reckon it must be because he smells you. He's afeared of you."

"Huh! He wasn't afraid of me that night, down there in the woods! Don't see what would make 'im afraid now. Anyhow, I'll spend every night out here from now on. If I can't kill a co'gar, I can keep 'im scared away from the flock. I'd have staid up there last night, but I'm rail-marked all over now."

"Thad, why not pull some grass and cover the rails? And I'll divide quilts with you."

This was a common-sense suggestion, and they acted upon it. Dusk found Thad shut up in his rail-cage, lying in wait for the sheep-killer. Believing that the belled beast of prey would hardly venture near while a guard was there, the boy did not remain awake very long.

He slept comfortably and peacefully on his bed of grass and quilts till an hour or two before dawn. Then he awoke to find himself in the midst of a frightful uproar.

The moon had risen, but as yet it gave little light in the pen. And there was such a fog of dust that the boy found it hard to see anything clearly. But the sheep were racing wildly round and round, and both

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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their terrified bleating and a rapid tinkling told that the belled cougar was in their midst.

Leaping up, rifle in hand, Thad sprang to the side nearest the bell. Soon he could make out the cougar. The brute had seized a lamb and stopped to bite the life out of it. Hastily, nervously, the boy thrust the rifle-barrel between the rails, took the best aim he could through the dim light and the fog of dust, and pulled the trigger.

The gun cracked sharply. The effect of the shot could only be guessed. But the cougar dropped the lamb and sprang toward the square pen. He halted but a few feet away, and stood growling and snarling, his glowing eyes fixed on the boy up in the rail-cage.

Putting down the empty rifle, Thad caught up the other, which was his own. But as he started to thrust the muzzle out, the cougar bounded forward, ran up the rails and stopped, clinging to the side of the pen. He was furious to get to the boy.

Instinctively Thad sprang back against the far side of his enclosure. But he pointed the gun straight at the cougar's heart, took deliberate aim, and pressed the trigger. The brute was so close that it would scarcely have been possible for the bullet to miss.

There was a click and a bright flash, but no report followed. For some reason the priming-powder had failed to fire the charge in the gun. In other words, the flintlock had flashed in the pan.

Greatly disappointed, Thad caught up the empty rifle and began to reload it. The cougar, snarling and growling, remained sticking to the side of the pen till

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## A FLASH IN THE PAN

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Thad was putting the cap on the tube. Then the brute sprang from the side to the roof. Now the boy could hear him walking about on the rails overhead.

Here was a situation. The roof being a double layer of rails, Thad could not thrust the rifle-barrel between them. Soon he heard sniffing, and then tinkling and the scraping of claws.

“Thad, what are you doin’?” Charley Dick’s voice now called out, evidently from inside the cabin.

“Nothing! I don’t know what to do!” There was a growl overhead.

“Why don’t you shoot the big booger?”

“How can I? I can’t even see ‘im!” Another growl.

“He’s standin’ right on top of you—of your pen!” Charley Dick was peeping out between two logs.

“I know that! But how can I shoot through rails?”

Here was heard more fierce growling, followed by sniffing, and that by scraping and a rapid tinkling of the little bell.

“He’s tryin’ to scratch through to you!” called Charley Dick’s voice again.

“I only wish he would!”

But the growling and tinkling and clawing soon ceased.

Seeing no present chance for a shot, Thad took a pin from his ammunition-bag and began to pick the lock of his flintlock, trying to open the touch-hole. He had opened the hole and filled the pan with powder, when the noisy tinkling of the bell and other sounds told him that the cougar had leaped to the ground.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Again the sheep began running and bleating. But the cougar only made straight for the dead lamb, caught it up, went over the fence at two bounds and was off down the hill.

As the brute had paused on the topmost rail, Thad had fired a hasty shot. But there was no time to take aim, and the bullet must have gone wild. However, the cougar uttered a loud, fierce scream as he struck the ground.

Bitterly disappointed, Thad stood listening till the tinkling had died away in the distance. Then he called, disgustedly:

“Charley Dick, come and let me out! I’m no good here anyhow!”

“Are you right shore he’s gone, Thad? I don’t want the booger to be jumpin’ on top of me!”

“Yes, he’s gone for to-night! Didn’t you hear his bell running off down the branch?”

“Reckon he won’t come back?”

“Guess not. But I do wish he would. Maybe I could shoot better next time. You needn’t come, though. I’ll stay in here till daylight.”

While it was still only half light, Charley Dick came out, climbed up, and opened a hole in the roof of the rail-cage.

“Right here I stay to-night, and every other night while that co’gar lives!” Thad declared, after crawling up through the hole. “I’m just naturally bound to have that co’gar’s hide to carry back to Fort Blocker with me. When he was there so close, I’d have killed ’im too dead to wiggle if my gun hadn’t flashed in the

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## A FLASH IN THE PAN

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pan. In fact, I just couldn't have missed 'im. But it won't flash next time; and I'll get 'im as sure as he's bold enough to set foot on this place again."

"What do you s'pose made 'im scream that a way after you shot? Don't you reckon you wounded 'im?"

"Maybe so—maybe not. He wasn't wounded much. Went off too fast. But I've thought of something."

"Thought of what, Thad?"

"You recollect the co'gar-tracks we saw in the ashes, when we went up to our place to run lye? Well, it was this belled varmint that made 'em."

"How do you know that?"

"Just before the bunch of redskins happened along that night, I woke up and heard a little bell right close to the corn-crib. You were still asleep. I thought somebody's calf must have jumped into the field, or got in somehow. But, before I'd had time to peep out, I heard the Indians coming. After that I forgot all about the calf, except that I recollect hearing the bell running off down through the field. The Comanches and the bees put everything else out of my head, and I hadn't thought of that bell till to-night. But there never was any calf in the field; and I know now that the little bell must have been on the co'gar."



## XV

### SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

WHEN Thad and Charley Dick examined the place where the sheep-stealer had crossed the fence, they found blood on the rails, and some on the grass a few yards beyond. But that had probably dripped from the dead lamb the cougar was carrying.

All day long, as the young shepherds stood guard over their flock, they talked of the happenings of the night before. And the more they talked, the keener became Thad's disappointment that he had failed to kill the big beast of prey.

"But I'll get 'im if he ever comes back—see if I don't!" he declared, resolutely. He had "picked" his flint, and also carefully opened the hole connecting the priming-powder with the main charge, so that there would not be another flash in the pan, or another misfire.

More than once, since they had been tending Mr. Bedford's flock, the boys had noticed wolves skulking near by, ready to pounce upon a stray sheep, or to carry off an unsuspecting lamb. Most of those were little prairie wolves, or coyotes, not of sufficient consequence to waste ammunition on. But one day the herders had

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## SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

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discovered a big timber wolf trying to steal upon the sheep. Him they would gladly have shot, but he kept out of range. Their own watchfulness, and that of their dog, enabled them to keep all such prowlers at a distance. And the pen was so high that non-climbing animals could not well get over it at night.

By noon to-day the sun had grown rather warm. The flock had grazed over to a prairie ravine, in which was running water, and whose banks were shaded by persimmon trees and pecan trees. After drinking at the little stream, the sheep took refuge in the shade. Soon most of them lay down to rest and chew their cuds. The boys had brought their dinner with them, and after watering their horses and turning them loose, they themselves sat down under a persimmon tree to eat.

When the meal was ended, they quenched their thirst at the stream. Later they stretched themselves on the grass in the shade. For several nights they had been kept awake, and now they were soon asleep. Watch, the dog, was lying near them. Most of the sheep were now resting under the trees, being strung out up and down the branch for two or three hundred yards.

The sun shone brightly, the air in the shade was just pleasantly cool, and scarcely a leaf was disturbed by a ripple of breeze. A lamb bleated now and then, and the little stream murmured and gurgled over its gravelly bed. Numerous bees and bumblebees were humming as they gathered honey from the thick-blooming wild flowers. Birds sang in the tree-tops, and larks out on the open prairie. A more peaceful scene could scarcely be imagined.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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This continued for perhaps an hour. Then came a change, as sudden as it was startling.

The two boys awoke to find themselves in the midst of noise and wild confusion. Everywhere there was scampering of hooved feet, with terrified bleating; and the two horses were snorting their alarm. The astonished young shepherds grasped their rifles and leaped to their feet. Watch, growling fiercely, was already making off down the branch as fast as he could run.

Looking in that direction, the herders saw a pair of timber wolves in the midst of some sheep. Now the boys were off like a flash, yelling lustily as they ran to the rescue. The she wolf had already seized a lamb and was trying to get away with it. Watch ran after her, and the boys ran after Watch. Soon the dog caught up with the wolf and seized her hind leg. Promptly she turned, dropping the lamb, and stood facing the dog, snapping and snarling defiantly.

The boys were eager to shoot, but dared not for fear of hitting the dog. When they were rather close, the wolf turned and darted away, disappearing among some trees before they could fire a shot.

A pitiful, terrified bleating was now heard. The other wolf had followed several sheep out upon the open prairie, and was about to seize one. Again the boys yelled, which caused the marauder to stop and look back. But quickly he was after the sheep again. Already both the boys and Watch were running after the wolf.

The terrified sheep made a circuit and ran back toward the branch. By taking a short cut, Watch was soon close upon the wolf. While the wolf was doubling

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## SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

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and turning, trying to seize the sheep, Watch made a rush and seized the marauder by the hind leg.

Now the beast of prey turned, snapping furiously at his assailant. Watch had had experience with wolves. Having plenty of respect for those fangs, he sprang back, and the two stood facing each other, snarling and growling.

Soon the wolf turned and again started after the sheep. And just as quickly Watch was after the wolf. While the beast of prey was seizing the sheep, the dog again rushed up and seized a hind leg. Promptly the wolf turned, snapping and snarling, and again Watch sprang back to escape those fangs.

By this time the two boys, after several short cuts, were within easy shooting distance. But the dog was between them and the sheep-killer. Knowing that the wolf would doubtless betake himself to flight if they went too close, Thad first stopped, and then began to run in a circle.

But just as he reached a point where he could get a clear view of the wolf, the wolf sprang round and was again behind the dog.

That gave Charley Dick a good mark—the very chance he wanted. Dropping to one knee, he rested his elbow on the other knee, took a careful aim, and fired.

It was a lucky shot. The wolf dropped to the ground and, when Thad rushed forward, was kicking and floundering about. Soon the shaggy fellow stretched himself and lay motionless.

Charley Dick now came running, much excited and more elated. “Is he dead, Thad?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Dead as dead can be! That shot of yours laid ’im out cold. He’ll never bother anybody’s sheep again.”

“Whoopee!” yelled the exultant wolf-slayer. “But ain’t I glad—ain’t I glad! I’ve al’ays wanted to knock over some big game, but that was the first time I ever had a good chance. Let’s off with his hide, first thing!”

“Yes, we’ll skin ’im. But we’d better get the sheep together first. No telling how far they’ve scattered by this time—the worst scared ones. And you’d better load.”

Charley Dick reloaded his rifle. Then they went to their horses and mounted. It was two hours later when, after much riding, they had the sheep together and under herd again.

Now they spent some time by the dead wolf, exulting over their victory and his defeat. Even in death the big beast of prey looked fierce and defiant. Finally Charley Dick drew his butcher-knife from its sheath, and Thad got out his pocket-knife, and they fell to skinning the brute.

“You’ve done mighty well, Charley Dick,” Thad remarked, as they spread the skin out on the grass, hairy side up. “We’ve got one big sheep-stealer; and if I’d done as well as you we’d have had another. Somehow I missed my chance. You didn’t miss yours, though. And I’ll do better next time—if next time ever comes.”

“It may come this very night, Thad. No tellin’.”

They now went in search of the lamb which the she wolf had seized, but failed to carry off. It was dead. They decided to have some fresh meat, and made it ready for cooking.

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## SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

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Ped was very much afraid of the wolf-skin, and snorted and shied off whenever it was brought near him. But Bob, Charley Dick's horse, was less scary. After the skin had been rolled up he allowed it to be tied behind his saddle.

When the sheep had been grazed over to within a few hundred yards of the pen, the boys went on and stretched the wolf-skin up against the cabin-wall to dry. Later they penned the sheep.

But as the flock passed through the gate, the herders counted them, to find that nearly twenty head were missing.

"Charley Dick, you stay here and look after things. I'll take Watch and go in search of the lost sheep."

"All right, Thad, if you say so. But maybe I'd better go with you. Couldn't Watch mind the sheep while we're gone?"

"He might. In daylight I'm pretty sure he could guard 'em. But I may be out till late. Somebody must keep riding till that bunch is found. The wolves and other varmints wouldn't leave one of 'em by morning. So I think you'd better stand guard here and let me and Watch hunt up the stragglers."

Charley Dick agreed, and Thad rode away. The sun was still shining when he started, and it was an hour after nightfall when he returned, driving the lost animals.

"I'm mighty glad you found 'em, Thad. I was afeard you wouldn't. Where did you run acrosst 'em?"

"Away over yonder on a branch. Two miles from here it must be. They wanted to be found about as

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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much as I wanted to find 'em, I guess. They'd quit grazing and gone to wandering about. And they kept bleating, bleating, bleating all the time, in the lonest way you ever heard."

The lost-and-found sheep were soon in the pen, and the boys were at the cabin. Charley Dick had a little fire burning out in the yard, a few steps from the door, and over it they broiled pieces of the wolf-slain lamb. Not very much later Thad, with both rifles, was out in his rail-cage, on guard, while Charley Dick returned to the cabin and shut himself in, to sleep. Watch was curled up on a saddle-blanket by the door.

Thad sat on his bed for an hour or two, watching and listening and thinking over the events of the day. When at length he did fall asleep, it was to sleep uninterruptedly till morning.

"Why do you reckon the co'gar didn't come back, Thad?" The two boys were standing by their little fire in the early dawn, broiling some more of the lamb for their breakfast.

"That I don't know, unless I hit 'im, and he thinks he'd better fight shy of this place from now on."

"Or mightn't it be, Thad, that you put a bullet into 'im, and he went off some'r's and laid down and died?"

"Well, yes, it could be that way. If it is, I'm glad and sorry both. I'm glad because he'll never trouble the sheep or us any more, and I'm sorry because I can't save his skin."

"If we just had time to look around a little, maybe we could run acrosst 'im."

"We could find 'im quicker by watching the buz-

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## SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

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zards, where they light down. But by the time we got there they'd have 'im so full of holes his hide wouldn't be worth taking off."

The sheep were soon turned out to grass, and the young herders followed them across the prairie. When they came in sight of the timber wolf's carcass, they saw that the buzzards were already there, making a meal of him.

In the afternoon several horsemen passed a few hundred yards from the sheep. They were driving a little bunch of cattle. One of them left the cattle and came by to speak to the boys.

"It's Clark Loring," remarked Thad.

Charley Dick nodded. "That's who it is. Runs the ranch mostly since one-armed Jack's axe finished his pap. Wonder what Clark wants."

The young ranchman stopped and sat on his horse while he talked. He did not seem to have any particular business, but had merely come by to be sociable. The boys told him of their experiences with the wolves, and also with the cougar. The latter part he had already heard, from Jack.

"And did the belled varmint happen around to see you last night?" the young man inquired.

"No," answered Charley Dick. "Thad staid out in the sheep-pen, all ready for 'im; but the booger didn't come anigh."

"Guess the reason was he wanted a change of diet," Loring remarked.

"How so, Clark?" inquired Charley Dick.

"Why, he wanted calf-meat instead of mutton."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Did you find where he’d killed a calf?” Thad wanted to know.

“Yes, we did. One of our calves it was, too. I’d like a shot at the brute, to pay ’im back for the calf he’s killed for us. Guess the little fellow bellowed for help, and the cattle come a-tearin’ and chased the big varmint away. Calf was dead when we found it, but the cow was still standin’ guard over it.”

“If the co’gar didn’t kill somethin’ else to stay his stomach, he’ll have a mighty keen appetite for lamb by to-night.”

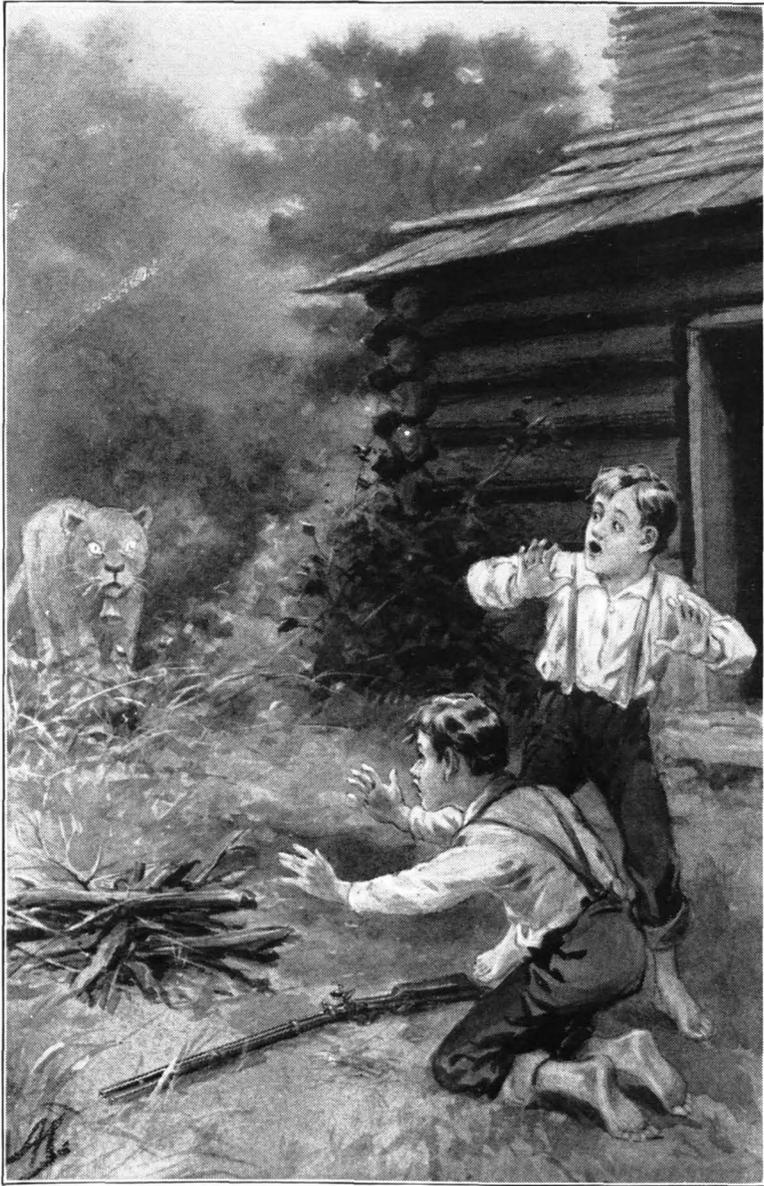
“That’s just what he will, Charley Dick,” Loring agreed. “So you boys want to sleep with your guns in your hands and one eye open. And if you get half a chance, give that robber a bullet or two for me.”

The ranchman soon rode on after his party, leaving the two herders to discuss the chances of another encounter with the belled beast of prey.

Rather earlier than usual they began to graze the flock towards the cabin; but the sun had disappeared before the last sheep was in the pen and the gate shut. Then they lariatied out their horses for the night, and went to the spring for a bucket of fresh water. It was dusk when they came back and made ready to cook some more of their lamb for supper.

Their little fire had gone out during the day, and the boys now proceeded to rekindle it. Charley Dick was down on his knees, holding some lint-cotton against some dry grass, while Thad, with the pan of his flintlock emptied, was snapping the lock over the cotton, expecting to drop a spark into the lint.





"SCARCELY A DOZEN FEET AWAY STOOD THE BELLED COUGAR."

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## SURPRISED BY THE BELLED COUGAR

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Watch had followed them down to the spring, but had not yet returned. He had had to do not a little running after contrary sheep while the flock was being penned, and he had remained at the branch to drink and cool himself in a pool below the spring.

The noise that diverted the boys' attention from their fire-kindling was the faint tinkle-tinkle of a little bell behind them. The sound was very slight, but they turned instantly, startled.

Scarcely a dozen feet away stood the belled cougar, with his evil eyes fixed upon them!



## XVI

### THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

**B**OTH boys leaped to their feet. The cougar growled and started back, but showed no intention of retreating. Thad hastily cocked his rifle; but even as he did so he recalled that the pan was empty. And both powder-horns were hanging on a peg just inside the door. Without priming-powder the weapon was utterly useless.

Charley Dick's rifle was leaning against the wall by the door; but the cougar was much closer to it than was either of the boys.

Paralyzed with astonishment and the realization of his own helplessness, Thad stood staring at the cougar. The brute growled again and again, and his eyes wandered from one of the boys to the other. His long tail kept moving sinuously to and fro, like an angry snake's tail when the snake is about to strike. What would happen next? The suspense was frightful.

Suddenly Watch, his shaggy coat still dripping water, dashed round the corner of the house. He had scented trouble, for his hair seemed all on end. He began to bark savagely at the beast of prey.

The cougar must have been taken by surprise; for

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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he suddenly turned tail and retreated around the other corner of the house. Watch followed, but not very far.

Now Thad sprang forward, dropped his own useless gun against the wall, and caught up Charley Dick's gun. He started around the house after the brute, but the violent ringing of the bell just then seemed to indicate that the cougar had made a leap.

Following an impulse to escape from danger, Charley Dick ran into the house, perhaps half intending to shut the door. But in a moment or two he had recovered and come out with a powder-horn.

"Here's your gun! Let me have that powder-horn, Charley Dick!"

But Charley Dick had already caught up Thad's rifle and was busy with it. "You watch! I'll prime this," he said. With the pan open, he began to let powder into it, his finger over the little end of the horn. As soon as the rifle was primed, Charley Dick closed the pan, cocked the gun, and set the double triggers. Now the boys started around the house in pursuit of the cougar.

They kept listening for the bell, but failed to hear it again. That did not prove that the cougar was standing still, however. For the fact that the brute had got so near before being discovered was evidence that he could walk without causing the bell to ring.

On around the house the two boys advanced. Watch, who knew well enough that he was no match for the big cat, kept just ahead of them, growling, with his hair on end, and very much on the alert.

Still farther around the boys moved, fearful, almost

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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trembling with fright, yet determined to fight it out with their dangerous enemy here and now. But they passed entirely around and came back to the door without discovering him. Then they went out and looked down the hill towards the branch, but no cougar could they see.

“Well, now, that beats me!” said Thad. “Where can the varmint have gone to?”

“Oh, he slipped back down to the bresh before we got round here,” Charley Dick answered. “No use huntin’ for ’im now. Let’s kindle a good big fire. If that don’t skeer ’im away, it’ll make light for us to shoot ’im by when he comes back.”

Charley Dick took the flintlock, sat down on the ground by their tinder, and, after emptying out the priming-powder, began trying to snap a spark into the cotton. But Thad did not join in the fire-kindling. Puzzled by the quick disappearance of the cougar, he looked in every direction, half expecting the brute to return. And there was something in Watch’s manner which indicated uneasiness.

Presently the dog sniffed the air and growled. Charley Dick turned his head for a moment, then went on snapping the flintlock. But Thad, feeling sure that danger was nigh, cocked his gun and advanced to the corner of the house. Nothing could be seen there. Then he stopped, intending to go for a look around the other corner. But suddenly Watch seemed to turn to a picture of rage, and his eyes were raised to the roof. Before Thad could glance up, the slight tinkle of a little bell warned him that the cougar was on the house-top!

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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Charley Dick turned and discovered the beast of prey on the roof. The cougar had his sinister eyes fixed upon him, and was already crouched for a spring!

The shock of the unexpected danger was so sudden that Charley Dick could not move a muscle. All he did was to sit motionless, paralyzed with terror. Next moment the beast rose up and launched himself straight at the boy seated on the ground!

But Thad, already warned by the dog, was neither surprised nor paralyzed. Up went his already cocked rifle, which cracked sharply on the twilight stillness while the cougar was yet in mid-air.

As the beast of prey struck the ground, he uttered a fierce scream, almost a shriek. Charley Dick had recovered from his paralysis in time to dodge to one side, but not in time to keep from being struck and knocked sprawling. A few moments later he scrambled out from under the cougar and made a wild dash for the door.

But in the doorway, as he turned to jerk the shutter to after him, he saw the beast bouncing and floundering about, plainly in his death-throes. Thad had also sprung toward the door, but there he had paused and was now reloading his rifle as fast as he could. Neither of the boys spoke, but both kept wary eyes on the floundering cougar till the gun was almost reloaded.

“Give me a cap, Charley Dick!”

Charley Dick had a few loose caps in his pocket, and he promptly handed out one. When it was on the tube of the rifle, Thad cocked the gun and stood eyeing the cougar.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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At length the beast lay motionless. Now Thad started to approach.

“Better look sharp! That big booger may be just tryin’ to fool you!”

Thad waited a minute or two longer, then approached and got hold of his own rifle, which was lying where Charley Dick had dropped it. Handing Charley Dick’s weapon to its owner, Thad hastily primed the flintlock.

Now, with cocked guns, both approached the motionless body. But the cougar was as harmless as a lamb. Thad’s bullet had gone straight through the big fellow’s heart.

All this had taken place so quickly that for a little while the two boys seemed scarcely to realize what had happened. But when they did fully grasp the fact that their enemy was dead, and that they had killed him, they could scarcely keep from whooping with delight.

By this time it was almost dark, and they kindled a fire on which to cook their supper, and also to make a light to see the cougar by. The big brute lay stretched out on his side, as if asleep. The bell was on his neck; and his hip bore the very distinct print of Chisholm’s branding-iron—a C with a half-circle over it.

After supper the boys sat by their fire for a good while, talking over every detail of their recent exciting adventure. As the cougar was past disturbing the sheep any more, it would not be necessary for anybody to stand guard out in the square pen hereafter. So Thad slept in the cabin with Charley Dick. And a very peaceful night they spent.

Next morning, after starting the sheep out to graze,

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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the boys came back and had another good look at the dead cougar. Then, having taken off the little bell, they removed the skin and stretched it up against the end of the cabin, with the wolf-skin, to dry. Later they dragged the carcass down the hill, to where the buzzards could hold a feast.

It was now necessary that one of the boys should make a trip over to Mr. Bedford's for something more to eat. So Thad went out with the sheep, and Charley Dick mounted his horse and rode away. He was carrying the wolf-skin, now nearly dry, to show to his aunt and cousins.

Charley Dick did not return. But not long after noon Mr. Bedford himself came, accompanied by another man. The other man was a stranger to Thad, and also, as was afterwards learned, a stranger in this part of the country. His name was Mack Potter. Mr. Bedford had happened upon him while returning home from scouting, and had hired him to herd the sheep.

"Yes, I got back late last night," the flock's owner said. "I'd have been over here early this morning, but I had to ride down to Fort Blocker to take some grist to mill. My sister is sick—Charley Dick's mother, you know—and I sent him home as soon as I got back and found him at the house."

"Is she very sick?" inquired Thad.

"Well, no. But she was sick enough for 'em to send down to Old Man Wylie Jones's for Doc Bailey. Come while I was there, doc did. He thinks she'll be up and about in a few days."

"Did you see any of my folks, Mr. Bedford?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Yes. I stopped and chatted with your pa and ma a few minutes. They’re all well. Your pa said tell you you could stay two or three days more if you wanted to.”

“But you won’t need me so long, will you, Mr. Bedford?”

Now that Charley Dick was gone, Thad was feeling a little lonely. He wanted to see all the home-folks again; and he was very eager to show them, as well as everybody else in the fort, that cougar-skin. Good shooting counted for much among these frontier people.

“Well, I’ve got lots of things to do at home, and I’d like for you to stay long enough to break the new herder in. He’s never had any experience with sheep, he tells me. And Charley Dick gives you the repytation of bein’ a good, careful hand.”

“We did the very best we could, Charley Dick and I. We lost one sheep and a few lambs. But I don’t see how we could have helped that. Two animals that caused the trouble are dead and skinned.”

“Yes, so I’ve heard from Charley Dick. And I’ve seen the skins, too. Guess you two done well not to lose any more sheep. I’d like for you to stay till to-morr’ noon anyhow, Thad. By that time Mack ought to have the run of things, so’s he can git along without you. Come over by the house when you start home. I’ll have your wool weighed and sacked up, all ready for you. Your ma said tell you to be shore and fetch it along. Said she wanted to begin cardin’ it right away. I sent Charley Dick’s wool down by him.”

“All right, sir. I’ll come by.”

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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After hearing again all the boys' experiences with the wolves and the belled cougar—he had already heard them once from Charley Dick—Mr. Bedford gave the new herder careful instructions, then rode away toward home.

Mack Potter was not a very prepossessing fellow in appearance. When Thad inquired of him where he had come from, the reply was rather indefinite. About the first thing Thad learned concerning Mack was that he could swear for a very slight provocation, or for no provocation. Also, he was somewhat lazy and had, at times at least, a very disagreeable temper.

When night was approaching, Thad and Mack watered the sheep about sunset, and penned them as usual. Mr. Bedford and Mack had brought over some meal, some bacon, some dried beef, and a little jug of sorghum molasses. Unlike the two boys, Mack would do his own cooking. When the sheep had all been penned, the herders kindled a fire in the fireplace and prepared their supper. Later they unrolled their bed and went to sleep.

Nothing disturbed the sheep during the night. But something that seemed very peculiar to Thad took place indoors.

Well on in the night the boy was aroused by talking. When fully awake, he knew that it was his bedfellow talking in his sleep. Mack kept talking, at intervals, for half an hour.

Thad had heard people talk in their sleep before now, and ordinarily would not have been surprised at it. But there was something peculiar about Mack Potter's

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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talking. Though the words seemed to be uttered distinctly, not one of them could the boy understand.

When morning came Thad, for some reason, said nothing to Mack of what he had overheard. But during the day, while the two were sitting on the grass near the flock, the boy inquired, in a careless way:

“Mr. Potter, did you ever live among the Mexicans?”

“Me? Of course not! What would I be doin’ among them Greasers?”

“I didn’t know. Wish I could talk Mexican.” The man made no reply, and Thad soon added: “If I just knew somebody that could teach me, I’d try to learn it. I know a few words already.”

“Don’t see what you want to talk that kind of talk up here fur! Now if I lived down in Mexico, I’d learn it, of course. Guess I’d have to. But not up here where a Greaser only comes onct in a ’coon’s age.”

“You can’t talk any Mexican, can you, Mr. Potter?”

“Well, I ruther reckon I cain’t! All I know is *adios*, good-by, and *owwah*, water.” *Owwah* is the way Mack pronounced it. *Agua* is the way a Mexican or a Spaniard would spell it.

Thad was much puzzled. Finally he ventured to inquire:

“Do you speak any language besides ours, Mr. Potter?”

Mack looked at the boy very straight. “What you want to know that fur?” he demanded.

“Oh, I just wanted to know. I’d like to learn some language, and I thought maybe you could teach me,” he evaded.

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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“Me teach you! Well, I ruther reckon I couldn’t!”

“You don’t know any other language, then?”

“No, I don’t. Of course I don’t! What would I be doin’ with any other kind of talk except white folks’s talk? Count myself lucky to talk that, I do.”

The expression, “white folks’s talk,” suggested something to Thad. And he knew that Mack had not told the truth. No person talks in his sleep in a language that he is ignorant of when awake. But why should the fellow wish to conceal the fact that he spoke another language?

Thad remained with Mack and the sheep till a little before noon. Then he mounted his horse and rode over to Mr. Bedford’s. His cougar-skin, carefully rolled up, was tied behind his saddle. He ate dinner at the stockaded house.

Two bags of wool, his herding wages, were ready for him. Tied together with a piece of rawhide rope, they were hung across the saddle in such a way that one hung down on each side. Ped did not like the bags, any more than he had liked the cougar-skin; but Thad soon reconciled him to carrying them. Then the boy set off toward the fort.

That square of rough log cabins had a very familiar, homelike look as Thad rode into it.

While passing the Wilkins house, he looked eagerly for Marzee, but she was not in sight. He spoke to Florence, who was out in the front yard; and at the sound of his voice Marzee came hurrying to the door.

“Howdy, Thad! Is that your co’gar-skin behind your saddle? Won’t you please let me see it?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Why, yes, of course.”

Very glad to display his trophy, Thad untied the saddle-strings, then let the skin fall to the ground, hairy side up.

“Oh, here’s where the cowboys branded the poor thing!” cried the girl, while spreading the skin out.

“How did you know the cowboys had branded ’im, Marzee?”

“Why, Charley Dick Sheegog told me that. Everybody in the fort knows all about the belled co’gar by this time, I guess. Charley Dick stopped here and showed us his wolf-skin, too. You boys are getting to be famous hunters.”

“Oh, not to brag of,” answered the cougar-slayer, modestly. But he was well pleased to have her say so.

“And the co’gar actually had a bell on?”

“He certainly did! Here it is.” Thad took the chain-collar from his saddle-horn and dropped the bell to the ground. “You look at ’em as much as you please, Marzee. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He rode on to his own door, where he dropped his bags of wool. After greeting his mother and the children, and telling them briefly of his experiences, he led Ped out up the north branch and lariatied him on the grass. When he came back, most of the boys and girls in the fort, and several of the grown people, had gathered around the cougar-skin. Charley Dick was there, with a water-bucket on his arm. He was telling everybody just how the cougar had been killed, and showing the bullet-hole.

When, after a good while, the crowd had dispersed,

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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Thad took the cougar-skin and the little bell home, and came back with his water-bucket. Then he and Charley Dick went on toward the spring together. Charley Dick's mother was much better. In fact, she was now sitting up.

As the two friends passed the mill, a rumbling sound was issuing from it. Glancing through an opening, Thad could see oxen climbing the big, tilted wheel, which turned under their weight and thus turned the millstones.

While the two boys strolled on down the water-path, Thad was telling Charley Dick of Mack Potter and his sleep-talking.

"Maybe he just muttered and mouthed, so's you couldn't understand 'im," suggested Charley Dick.

"No. He spoke right out. I thought he'd been living in Mexico; but he says he hasn't, and can't speak Spanish."

"Don't you reckon he's just lived over acrosst Red River, and learnt to talk the Chickasaw talk?"

"I thought of that. But he denies he can speak any language except ours. If he talks Chickasaw, why should he be ashamed to say so?"

"That I don't know. What do you think, Thad?"

"Why, that Mack Potter has been living with the wild Indians—the Comanches or the Kiowas."

At this Charley Dick almost gasped. And he actually stared at his companion.

"There's another thing makes me think that," Thad went on. "When we started out this morning, Mack didn't intend to take anything to shoot with. I asked

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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'im why not, and he said: 'Oh, what's the use of loadin' yourself down with shootin'-irons?' And when I wanted to know what he'd do if Indians ran onto us, he said Indians were not as dangerous as most people think; and he had doubts whether they will ever raid this country any more. I didn't say much. But in all my born days I've never heard such fool talk as that from anybody else!"

"Me neither, Thad. But if the chap has been livin' among the wild Indians, what's he doin' here now?"

"Who knows? He may just have got tired of the Indian ways. Or maybe—maybe—"

"Could it be that he's here spyin' for the redskins?"

"That's the first thing I thought of."

"If that's what he's up to, the settlers would make it mighty hot for 'im if they found it out."

"They certainly would, Charley Dick. So I guess we'd better keep all this to ourselves."

"That's right. It might turn out to be some other way from what you think, and we'd just git folks down on Mack Potter for nothin'. Used to be two men named Jones that lived on Mountain Creek, up in Montague County—a man and his grown son. They'd go to work without their guns or six-shooters, and folks got to s'picionin' them of standin' in with the Comanches. But it wasn't so—narry word of it. While the two men was out in the woods one day, splittin' rails, and without a solitary thing to shoot with, the red boogers run onto 'em and killed and scalped 'em both. My pa was one of the party that found their bodies."

"That so? Then of course we'd better keep our

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## THE MAN WHO TALKED IN HIS SLEEP

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mouths tight-shut about this whole business till we know for certain what's what. Might happen not to be anything in it, after all. But I believe there is something in it, just the same."



## XVII

### A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

OH, Thad, it seems to me like you've been gone two months instead of two weeks, you and Charley Dick," Marzee said, when Thad went to the cow-pen at milking-time. The girl was already out there, milking, on the other side of the partition-fence.

Thad looked well pleased. "It seems a long time to me, too, Marzee. Did you miss us?"

"Why, of course I missed *you*. I don't know so well about Charley Dick. But you live next door to us, and milk almost in the same cow-lot. I couldn't help missing you if I tried."

"Well, I hope you didn't want to help it. We'd have got homesick for the fort, I guess, but so many things kept happening they didn't give us time."

Both were soon busy with a cow apiece. While milking, Thad gave Marzee more details of the exciting experiences at the sheep-camp; and she, in turn, related various happenings in the fort, especially among the boys and girls.

"Don't you think Humpy has been growing a lot since I went away?" Thad inquired.

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## A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

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“Well, I guess maybe he has. I hadn’t noticed it, though.”

“That must be because you’ve been seeing ’im twice every day. He looks bigger to me. And his hump must be growing faster than he is—faster than the rest of ’im. And Specklesides acts like she’s just as fond of ’im as ever.”

“Yes, she is that, Thad. She thinks there never was another such calf, and never will be another like ’im.”

“Guess she’s right about that. Never will be another calf like ’im for her. Not many cattle cows happen to find buffalo calves.”

“No, I should say not. I never heard of such a thing before.”

Later Thad went up to the house, soon returning with a little bell on a chain.

“What are you going to do with that calf-bell?” the girl was curious to know.

“This is not a calf-bell. Or, anyhow, it hasn’t been for a good while. It’s a co’gar-bell. But Humpy will wear it from now on.”

“Maybe Humpy won’t like it. If I was a calf, I wouldn’t want a bell on my neck that has been on a co’gar’s neck—ugh! Makes me shiver!”

“If you were a calf, you wouldn’t know anything about it, and wouldn’t care any more than Humpy does,” Thad remarked, while fastening the chain-collar around the calf’s neck with the piece of wire.

“What do you want to bell him for? Afraid he’ll run away and you can’t find ’im?”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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"No. I'm afraid somebody might take 'im for a wild buffalo and shoot 'im for meat, especially after he gets a little bigger."

Mr. Dayberry, who was up at the farm at work, came home about dusk. Next morning he and Thad drove up to the farm together. A day or two later a squad of scouts went out, and Mr. Dayberry was due to go with them. But he had arranged with Hardin Witt, one of Parson Witt's sons, to take his place. So he and Thad kept on with their farm-work. They left the fort early and returned late.

One day, while the two were eating their dinner in the shade of the little granary, the man said, with a glance at the empty, silent hives:

"I'm so sorry the red rogues run off all our bees. This ought to be a fine bee-country—better than Parker County, looks to me like. We could have took out lots of honey in the fall, I almost know."

"Where do you s'pose our runaway bees went to, pa?"

"Back to the woods, I expect."

"Couldn't we come across some of 'em if we went over there and looked long enough?"

"No tellin', Thad. We might—might do that very thing."

"Then why not let's try it some time?"

"I'd just as lieve as not."

"When, pa?"

"Well, say as soon as we git through workin' out our crop. That won't take us a great while now."

One morning, a few days later, Mr. Dayberry and

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## A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

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Thad drove out of the fort and on up the valley. Charley Dick Sheegog was in the wagon with them. On coming to the Dayberry farm, they got out, unyoked the oxen, hobbled and belled one of them, and turned them loose to graze. It was a lovely spring morning. They could not have picked a better time for their bee-hunt. Mr. Dayberry had hunted bees before, and knew just how to proceed.

The prairie hill that rose steeply from the west or upper edge of the little farm, was now odorous and beautiful with myriads of wild flowers. The spring rains had caused them to start up, and the heat of summer had not yet come on to wither them. Shouldering their guns, the man and his two companions climbed the hill and tramped away across the prairie. Many bees, the hunters were quick to notice, were already busy among the flowers.

“Now, boys, let’s pick out some partic’lar bee and keep our eyes on ’im till he starts home with his arms full of honey. That’s the best way to git on their trail.”

“All right, pa! Here’s one now!” cried Thad.

The little honey-gatherer kept hurrying busily from flower to flower, sometimes remaining a minute or two in one cluster. At last, however, its load of honey was complete. Rising in the air, the insect hesitated a few moments, perhaps till it could get the lay of the land. Then it promptly sailed away on the proverbial bee-line.

“Watch ’im, boys—watch ’im—watch ’im!” called out Mr. Dayberry, as the bee began to rise. And when it was starting off on its course, he shouted: “Run

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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after 'im, Thad, as fast as you can hoof it! Keep right under 'im, and run as long as you can see 'im! Then stop in your tracks and stand as still as a stump!"

The boy, his rifle in his hand, started off at a run. When Thad was some yards away, the man called out:

"There you go, Charley Dick! Keep the bee in sight just as long as you can, and then stop and stand!"

Away went the other boy, carrying his father's rifle. His head was thrown back as his eyes followed the bee. Mr. Dayberry, his shot-gun on his shoulder, was hurrying after them. Soon he saw Charley Dick stop, and a little later Thad also came to a standstill. The man himself had watched the bee as long as it was visible, and he knew that the two boys were now on the line of the bee's flight.

Going to where Charley Dick was standing, he took the boy's place and sent him forward a few hundred yards beyond Thad. Then the man went and occupied Thad's place, sending Thad a few hundred yards beyond Charley Dick. And so they moved on across the prairie, following a straight line.

At length the bee-trailers came to a prairie branch. Where the "bee-line" crossed the branch there was not a little timber, some of the trees being large.

"Now, boys, that bee may have stopped here, or he may have kep' straight on over to the big woods. Put your caps where you're standin', till you can find a rock or a chunk to mark the spot. That way we can pick up our course ag'in if we need to foller it fu'ther."

The boys did as the man had suggested. Then they all began to search the strip of woods. They gave most

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## A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

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of their attention to trees which bore signs of being hollow. For it was only in hollow trunks or limbs, of course, that the little honey-makers could find a home.

“Put your year ag’inist every tree that looks like it’s holler,” Mr. Dayberry advised. “If there’s bees in it, you’re apt to hear ’em buzzin’.”

After half an hour of passing from tree to tree, Charley Dick was heard to utter a triumphant whoop. “Here she is!” he called out.

Thad ran to the spot, soon followed by his father. Sure enough, some twenty feet above the ground small winged things could be seen flying in and out at a knot-hole of a big elm.

“You’ve struck the right tree, Charley Dick,” Mr. Dayberry said, after shading his eyes and squinting up at the bees.

“Pa, do you reckon these are the very same bees that ran off and left our gums?”

“Hard tellin’ as to that, Thad. Our bees wasn’t branded, you know; and not a single one of ’em had their years marked. Chances air this swarm used to keep house in one of our gums. But of course we’ll never know for certain and shore about that. Cain’t say as it raily matters a great sight. Out with your knife, Charley Dick, and whittle our brand on it!”

So Charley Dick drew the butcher-knife from its sheath and carved a big X in the bee-tree’s bark. The rules of the woods required this. Otherwise a later finder could claim the tree. Then the party shouldered their guns, climbed the steep hill, and were soon back on the high prairie.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Now for another honey-bee to trail!” Charley Dick cried out, as the three entered a brilliant patch of flowers.

“Here’s your bee!” Thad exclaimed. And the two boys were soon following the tiny honey-gatherer from blossom to blossom.

When at length the bee rose in the air and sailed off on its homeward flight, the boys started in enthusiastic pursuit. But Thad’s father called them back.

“No use to fool away time on that feller!”

“Why not, pa?”

“Because he’s takin’ the same shoot the other one took. We already know where he lives. Pick out a new bee and take a fresh start.”

Several more bees the two boys watched and followed till the homeward flight began. But every bee sped away toward the marked tree.

“Let’s move up the prairie a good piece, and see if we cain’t pass beyond that swarm’s range,” proposed the man.

So they all tramped north more than half a mile. Then they tried again. The first bee they watched sped away toward the already discovered tree. They had to trail it a few hundred yards to make sure. But the second sailed off on a different course. And the hunters followed as fast as they could. The boys kept running ahead, first one and then the other, while the man remained behind to motion them in line.

This time the watched bee went much farther. At length the trail crossed a prairie branch. Here there were only smaller trees and brush, and the bee-hunters

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## A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

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did not think it worth while to stop. Still keeping their course, they moved on till they came to the edge of the Cross Timbers. As the great forest here beginning stretched westward for many miles, locating some particular tree in it would be much like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack.

But, as it happened, they were fortunate enough to notice another honey-laden bee bringing home its load; and by following the new guide they found the bee-tree only a few hundred yards out in the woods.

Again the triumphant honey-hunters held a sort of jollification around a crawling, buzzing knot-hole. Later they cut their mark in the post-oak's bark and returned to the prairie. They were also careful to note and mark a conspicuous dead tree at the edge of the woods.

This time they did not return to where they had started from, but contented themselves with visiting patches of flowers only a few hundred yards out from the edge of the forest. Several bees the party watched and started to follow; but every bee winged its way toward the tree already discovered. Finally they watched one that set off on a different course. They lined its flight, both to the edge of the woods and for perhaps half a mile into the woods. But, though they tried to examine every good-sized tree along their line, and on both sides of it, they failed to find the tree they were looking for.

After wasting more than an hour, they gave up the search and sought the prairie once more. It was now noon, and they seated themselves in the shade of a persimmon tree, near a tiny running stream, and ate

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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their dinners, each from his own ammunition-bag. Later they stretched themselves on the grass and took a nap. After an hour or more they got up and began their bee-hunting again.

Several bees which they watched and started to follow made toward that same undiscovered tree. So the little party moved northward again, and soon found a bee that sped off on a new course. This one they followed resolutely, examining every larger tree near its line of flight till they were perhaps a mile deep in the forest. Their search had been in vain. But just as the party were about to turn back, Thad caught sight of something through the woods—something which they were all interested in. It was smoke. They hurried on toward it.

“Why, it’s somebody’s camp-fire!” cried Charley Dick. “Who do you reckon has been campin’ out here, away off from any road?”

They approached the smoldering fire. Near it lay some object, which soon took the shape of a hog. For an animal that made its own living in the woods, this hog was of good size and fat. That it had been killed for food was quickly evident; for chunks or slices of flesh had been cut out here and there.

“What in the world does that mean? Who could have—?” Charley Dick began to exclaim.

But Mr. Dayberry lifted a warning finger, as he glanced around uneasily.

“Sh! Don’t make a noise! I don’t like the looks of things here! Let’s spy out the tracks first, and see what they’ll tell us.”

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## A HUNT FOR RUNAWAY BEES

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Before noting the camp further, Thad and Charley Dick lowered their rifles to their arms, where they carefully examined them, to make sure that the locks were in good working order. The man also examined both his double-barrel shot-gun and his six-shooter. All were impressed with a sense of danger. Then with their eyes they explored the surrounding woods in every direction, as far as they could see. But nothing suspicious could they discover. Now the party again turned their attention to the camp-fire.

“What’s that thing sticking in the hog?” Thad spoke scarcely above a whisper.

Mr. Dayberry approached the dead animal, stepping cautiously, and stooped and plucked the object out. He held it up, and the three gazed at it, the two boys in utter bewilderment. It was a tiny red flag.

“Who put it there, do you s’pose, Mr. Dayberry?”

“Redskins, I expect.”

“And what does it mean, pa?”

“Not much tellin’ for certain. But my guess is it means war. Red stands for blood.”

“It means they’re startin’ out on the war-path, you think?” Charley Dick spoke in awed tones.

Thad laughed noiselessly. “Starting out on the war-path! That’s a good joke, Charley Dick! Why, they’ve been on the war-path as long as anybody can recollect, the Comanches have. Little use for ’em to give us warning this late in the day. We all know they’re on the war-path—know it as well as we know we’re alive. Be mighty big gumps if we didn’t.”

“Yes, we know that a’ready. But maybe they don’t

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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know we know. Don't you reckon that's the way, Mr. Dayberry?"

"Well, not easy to say for certain as to that, Charley Dick. The Comanches ought to know, of course. But the boogers that camped here may belong to some other tribe—some new tribe, that hasn't been on the war-path till now."

"Guess that's about the way of it—some new tribe," remarked Thad.

"If any more tribes start to make war on us, the whites will all have to git up and dust, won't they, Mr. Dayberry?"

"Looks a right smart like it, Charley Dick. Bad enough now, in all reason. But let's study the signs and see what we can find out around here."

The soil in the Cross Timbers, unlike that of the adjoining prairie, which is black and sticky, is very sandy. In well-shaded spots, where not much grass grew, the sand was almost bare. It was in one of these bare spots that the camp-fire had been kindled, perhaps to keep it from spreading.

The three approached the sandy spot, but kept on the edge of the grass.

"Do you see that?" Mr. Dayberry was pointing to a depression in the loose sand.

"Moccasin-track, ain't it?" whispered Charley Dick.

"But what's this—what does this mean?" demanded Thad, pointing to a track which bore little resemblance to the others.

His father and Charley Dick looked. And now the three stared, first at the track and then at one another.



## XVIII

### BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

“WHAT is that?” asked Charley Dick, still staring, though he knew well enough.

“No mistakin’ that print,” Mr. Dayberry remarked. “It’s as plain a boot-track or shoe-track as ever was tracked. Long I’ve heard tell of renegade white men among the redskins. I’ve never laid eyes on one to know ‘im; but right here I see one’s sign. ‘Let’s read some more signs and learn what the red raiders have printed for us.”

Now they carefully scrutinized all the tracks around the camp-fire. There were about ten in the war-party, they thought, but only one white man; or at least only one that did not wear moccasins.

“Let’s spy around a little where the horses stood tied, and see what we can make out there,” proposed the man, later.

After learning all that could be learned from the signs, the bee-hunters surmised that the raiders had camped here late the day before, to rest and graze their horses and eat a supper of fresh pork. Some time during the night—probably not long after nightfall—

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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the band had mounted and ridden away. Their trail led eastward toward the prairie. After rounding up a bunch of the settlers' horses, they had probably turned and ridden hard toward the west. Already, doubtless, they were far beyond the reach of pursuit.

That was what had probably happened. But of course it was possible that the savage raiders were still lurking somewhere in the depths of the great forest.

After learning all that could be learned from reading the signs, the bee-hunters made their cautious way back to the prairie. The afternoon was still little more than half spent, and they went right on with their bee-hunting. But they were less noisy than before, and kept a more careful watch around them.

They found one more bee-tree, not far from the edge of the forest. That made three in all. And they followed several other bees into the forest which they failed to locate. When the sun was not very high, they trudged back across the prairie to the Blocker Creek farm, and from there drove on down to the fort.

"When are we going to cut the trees we've found, pa?" questioned Thad, as the wagon was jogging along down the valley.

"Not till the late summer or the early fall. By that time they ought to have lots of honey in 'em. We'll rob the bees and hive 'em before the flowers are all gone, though, so they'll have time to lay in their winter's feed."

"But them three swarms is not all you lost, Mr. Dayberry. Don't you expect to go out and hunt up the other two?"

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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“Yes, I ruther reckon so, Charley Dick. First day when the ground’s too wet for farm-work we’ll come up and take another little hunt.”

“Bank of black clouds in the northwest,” Thad remarked. “Wouldn’t surprise me if it rained to-night.”

It did rain that very night—a heavy downpour. As there was no farm-work that could be done next day, Thad’s father and the two boys armed themselves, saddled and mounted their horses, and rode away for another bee-hunt.

Blocker Creek almost swam the horses as they forded it. The party did not go up to the farm, but crossed the creek near the spring, then climbed the hill to the high prairie and rode away toward the northwest till they struck the timber, about where they had been the day before. There, at the edge of the prairie, they lariatied their horses to bushes. They preferred to do their honey-hunting on foot.

The very first bee they lined led them to a tree only a few hundred yards out in the woods. But after that they lined numerous bees into the forest, only to lose them there. When noon-time came they had located but two bee-trees. After eating their dinner near their horses, and resting for an hour or so, they resumed their bee-trailing.

Now the first bee they followed led them into the woods at a new place. This was a very brushy part of the Cross Timbers, and scarcely had the three entered the brush when a most terrific crashing started up near them. They knew well enough what was the

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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matter. They had disturbed a little herd of wild cattle that were in hiding here. These were the ownerless wild cattle—as wild as the deer or the antelopes—which had been here since long before the first settler came. Like the wild horses, they had spread over this whole southern country from Mexico. Commonly they hid themselves in the woods in the daytime, but would venture out upon the prairie to graze at night.

This bunch of cattle was soon out of sight and hearing. But an hour or two later the honey-hunters had a more thrilling experience with longhorns. But those wore brands, and somebody claimed them. They were grazing on the prairie, not far from the edge of the woods.

As usual, the boys were running ahead, to line out a bee's course. Thad, as he drew near the cattle, scarcely noticed them. That he might get over ground faster, he had left his rifle with his father. He supposed that the cattle would soon turn and betake themselves to flight. His back was toward them, and he was watching his father's motions, when he heard Charley Dick yell:

“Better look out there, Thad! That's cow's threatenin' you!”

Thad swung round quickly, to see that a black cow with a white face had her head lowered; and her upturned eyes were watching him in a sinister way. Some of these range cattle would run when any person approached them, but others had no fear of anybody on foot.

Thad glanced about him anxiously. There was only

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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level prairie. The woods were not far away, with a little group of live-oak trees a hundred yards nearer. But the cattle were almost between him and those nearest trees. And that vicious-looking brute kept moving a step or two toward him every now and then. Before the boy could make up his mind which way to go, she suddenly lowered her head, till her nose almost touched the ground, and charged him, as straight and as hard as she could drive!

No time to hesitate now. Mr. Dayberry and Charley Dick, with all the weapons, were still a quarter of a mile away. If Thad fled toward them, the cow would catch him before he had covered a hundred yards. Those live-oak trees, he was quick to decide, were his one hope of safety.

So, instead of taking to flight, he faced his enemy. The cow was rushing straight toward Thad, and Thad ran straight to meet the cow, yelling with might and main as he did so.

If the boy had thought to frighten the vicious brute from her purpose, he would have been woefully disappointed; for she came furiously ahead. But Thad had a plan of his own.

When almost in reach of the cow's horns, he suddenly swerved a yard to one side, then dashed by her. Now he sped toward those live-oaks as fast as his frightened legs could carry him.

The cow, seeing her intended victim about to escape, checked herself with surprising suddenness, turned and was quickly in furious pursuit. In fact, fast as the boy ran, she was soon almost at his heels. One glance over

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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his shoulder told him that his situation was indeed desperate.

The trees he was trying to reach were a group of three live-oaks, all growing from the same root, and each leaning outward from the others. Like most of their kind, these trees were low, with spreading tops, and their lower branches were only a few feet above the ground. Thad believed that, with time to pick his limb, he could jump up, grasp the limb, and swing himself out of the cow's reach. But he doubted if that would be possible while going at his present speed.

But something had to be done, and that immediately, or that savage brute would have him on her horns. His first thought was to try to elude her by dodging around the tree-trunks, and he checked his speed slightly for that purpose. But on the moment he changed his plan and darted between them. There was room for him, but not for the cow.

But she could pass round, and she did. By that time, however, Thad had checked himself. He eluded her by slipping between the trunks again, and quickly had them between him and her. But with astonishing swiftness the brute came round after him.

Several times the boy dodged back and forth in this way. The first limbs, where they left the trunks, were all too high for him to reach, or even to leap up and grasp. But they curved over, and at their outer ends were lower. Selecting a limb of about the right height, Thad suddenly left the sheltering trunks and made a dash for it, with his enemy still after him.

Up he leaped. It was a high jump for him. When

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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less excited he could not have made it. But now he clutched the limb with both hands. He had barely time to swing himself up and throw his feet around the limb, when the furious cow rushed under him.

The limb kept swaying up and down with his weight, threatening to lower him within reach of the cow's horns. But he crept along to a higher place, and then swung himself up on top of the limb. Now he was soon on a safe perch.

All this had happened in less time, perhaps, than it has taken to tell it. At first Mr. Dayberry and Charley Dick had started to Thad's assistance. But as soon as he had reached a perch of safety, they stopped and began to consider what was best to do.

"Come ahead and shoot the old wench!" yelled Thad.

He was very angry. Already, in his imagination, he could see Marzee Wilkins, to say nothing of the other girls and boys, laughing gleefully when his father and Charley Dick told in the fort of his undignified adventure. And what boy ever lived who did not resent being made ridiculous in the eyes of his boy-friends and girl-friends?

"If I just had my rifle, I'd show you how to chase people, you old rip!" exclaimed Thad, wrathfully, to the cow. And the cow, nothing daunted by this threat, only shook her horned head wrathfully in reply.

"Couldn't we just walk straight up and shoot her down when she charges us?" Charley Dick was saying to Thad's father, as the two stood together out on the prairie.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Yes, we could do that. But we don’t want to murder the pore brute unless we have to.”

“But she deserves to be shot for chasin’ Thad like she did.”

“Well, now, Charley Dick, I don’t know that it’s a powder-and-lead offense to chase a boy. That cow has got a young calf hid out some’r’s right clost by, I’m guessin’. And she s’picioned Thad of bein’ about to harm it. Good thing these cows have got the spunk to fight for their calves. If the cows didn’t stand ready to fight at the drop of a hat, the wolves and co’gars and catamounts would soon have the last calf et up.”

“But she ought to have sense enough to know that Thad’s not a wolf or a catamount.”

“Charley Dick, that cow has got all the sense she was born with. She has to do the best she can with that. It ain’t common sense to expect a dumb brute to be as smart as a human. There, the other cattle are startin’ off. If we wait a few minutes, the cow will be apt to foller ’em.”

And that was just what happened. As soon as his enemy was at a safe distance, Thad descended from his perch of safety and went back to his friends. He grinned sheepishly, and was not surprised when his father and Charley Dick began to tease him.

By this time they had lost their course, and had to go back and follow another bee. They worked steadily, and when the sinking sun warned them to return to the fort, they had found four bee-trees to-day. At least two of the swarms located, and possibly more, were bees that had long been wild.

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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Marzee was at the cow-pen when Thad, back at home, went out to milk. He had not seen her the night before. She had gone down half a mile below the fort to Mr. Sheegog's—not the family that Charley Dick belonged to—to spend the night with Jenny Sheegog. Now she was very much interested in what Thad had to tell her of their bee-hunting, and even more in the Indian camp they had found the day before, with boot-tracks among the moccasin-tracks.

He also told her of his experience with the fighting cow. But though he tried to make it as funny as he could, the girl did not laugh—scarcely smiled, in fact. She seemed to think the adventure more dangerous than amusing.

After supper Thad crossed over to Marzee's door, and showed her the little red flag they had found sticking in the dead hog at the Indian camp. She was much interested in that, as was everybody else in the fort. The night before Captain Graham had heard of the flag and come over to Mr. Dayberry's for a look at it. There had been some talk of pursuing the savages, but, owing to a shortage of men in the fort, nothing had been done.

Next morning Mr. Dayberry and Thad drove up to the farm, taking their cradle with them. They had several acres of wheat up there, which would soon be ripe enough to cut. Patches were already ripe, and in one of those they cradled what would have been two or three sheaves. That, though they did not bind it, they took back to the fort, handling it very carefully. During the next few days Thad and his father were busy

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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plaiting wet straw in an endless braid. Later, when the plaiting was well under way, Mrs. Dayberry began to sew the braid together. Soon both Thad and his father were seen going about the square in new, bright-straw hats.

And they were not alone. About this time nearly every man and boy in the fort appeared with a similar new head-covering—all of home manufacture.

No sooner were the hats finished than Mr. Dayberry and Thad again drove up to the farm, with their cradle in the wagon. Their wheat was now ripe, and during the next several days they were very busy harvesting.

The man did the cradling, while Thad, who had already learned to bind, followed the cradle and bound the wheat into sheaves. He could not keep up, but, from time to time, his father would lay down the cradle and help him with the binding. And late in the day they would both work together to collect the sheaves.

Like most healthy boys, Thad was very ambitious to do a man's work. Sometimes, when his father had laid the cradle down, the boy would take it up and swing it for a few minutes. He was awkward at first, but soon learned both to cut and to lay the wheat down evenly. However, the cradle was pretty heavy for him, and before long he would be willing to go back to his binding.

"You'll make a purty handy cradler by next summer, Thad," his father assured him. "And by that time, if not sooner, you ought to be big enough to ride out with the scouts in my place."

"I hope so," answered the boy, with more eagerness than he cared to show.

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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They finished their harvesting about the middle of one afternoon, and drove back to the fort. While they were taking out the oxen, behind the house, Lieutenant Reel came over and said:

“Dayberry, the Widow Tucker, over in the Willa Walla Valley, has several acres of wheat that needs harvesting. She’s not very well able to hire it cut, and we’re making up a party to go over there to-morrow morning and harvest it for her. If we can get hands enough, we ought to finish up a good while before night. What do you say?”

“I say you can count me in. We can’t afford to neglect the widders. And if you need any boys to shock, Thad can go ’long as well as not.”

“Why, yes; the more help we have, the sooner we’ll get through. Finest piece of wheat in the whole country, they say.”

The lieutenant soon walked back across the square. Thad got the water-bucket and started to the spring. On the way he stopped at the Wilkins door for a minute, and while talking mentioned the expected harvesting at Mrs. Tucker’s.

“I know about that, Thad. Pa’s going to make a hand, and I’m going with him to help cook and wash the dishes. He’s already said I may.”

“I’m glad you’re going, Marzee. Ought to be a good many people there, I guess.”

“If I was a man, I’d just dearly love to swing a cradle. I love to see wheat fall. Won’t you be glad when you’re big enough to cradle, Thad?”

“I can cradle now. I can swing our cradle about as

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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well as pa, but not so long. I'll make a hand at the cradle next year. Pa said so."

On the way to the spring Thad heard the mill rumbling, and could catch glimpses of the oxen climbing the big wheel. Several horses stood hitched to trees near by, while their owners, who had come from the surrounding country, were in the mill waiting for their grist. One of the horses looked familiar to Thad. But before he could recall where he had seen the animal, a man emerged from the mill with a bag of meal on his shoulder, and walked straight to that particular horse.

"Hello there, Thad! How are you makin' it by this time?"

"Why, hello, Mack! Pretty well, I guess. What you doing so far from the Catamount Branch sheep-camp?"

"Well, Old Man Bedford happened by on his way to mill, and I up and persuaded 'im to stay there and let me come down here. I've seen so much of them cuss-ed sheep here of late, that the very sight of a sheep turns me sick at my stomach."

"Any more wild animals been troubling you?"

"Yes—yessirree! Last Sunday night a week ago I slep' a little too sound, I guess, and a whopper of a big wolf, jedgin' from the tracks, got into the pen and killed five of the critters. Bedford was mad about it, and wanted to blame me."

"Could you sleep with a wolf in the sheep-pen? That's more than Charley Dick and I could do. Too much noise. And where was Watch?"

"He was there. He must have tackled the brute. Had a ugly gash in his shoulder next mornin'."

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## BOOT-TRACKS AMONG MOCCASIN-TRACKS

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The herder soon rode away with his meal, and Thad went on to the spring. While returning, he stopped near the mill, set his water down and began to examine the dusty path. Presently he found where Mack had crossed the path.

“What you lookin’ at there, Thad?” It was Charley Dick, on his way to the spring with a water-bucket.

Thad glanced up. “Glad you’ve come. Take a close look at this track and tell me if you ever saw one just like it.”

Charley Dick stared at the footprint in the dust. “Cain’t say as I ever did.”

“Does it look anything like the boot-tracks we saw at that Indian camp?”

Charley Dick stared harder. “About the same size, looks to me like. But what you drivin’ at, Thad?”

“What I’m drivin’ at is: I think the chap that made this track made the boot-tracks around that redskin camp-fire too.”



## XIX

### THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

YOU do!" Charley Dick stared at Thad, and almost gasped. "Who—who in the world was it?"

"Don't you recollect I told you about a man that talked in his sleep—talked some kind of strange talk I couldn't understand?"

"You mean Uncle Dan's sheep-herder? Yes, I recollect—of course I do!"

"Well, this is his track."

The other boy gazed thoughtfully at the footprint in the dust. "Oh, shucks, Thad! Ain't nothin' in that! One man's track looks just like every other man's track."

"Ye-es, sometimes—and sometimes not. But there's more to this. Do you recollect what day of the week it was that we first went bee-hunting—the day we happened onto that camp-fire?"

Charley Dick reflected, "Let's see. That was the day it rained at night. It was—it was—Monday. I know it was because—"

"That's right. I recollect well enough it was Monday—a week ago last Monday. Well, on the night be-

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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fore that, Sunday night, so Mack told me, a wolf broke into the sheep-pen and killed several sheep. And that was the night the Indians must have camped where we found their fire."

"Well, what of that?"

"Why, don't you see? Mack claims he was in the cabin there at the sheep-camp, and that he slept through all that frightful rumpus. But I've got my doubts. The sheep would have made noise enough to wake the sleepest sleepyhead—anybody but a dead man."

"They al'ays woke both of us mighty quick. I recollect that well enough."

"I'd say they did! And they'd have waked Mack, too, if he'd been there."

"Then, where do you reckon he was, Thad?"

"Over at that camp in the woods with that red-skinned gang, tracking the tracks we saw—the boot-tracks."

Charley Dick looked first at Thad, and then at the footprint in the path. Soon he whistled to give expression to his astonishment. "Does look mightily like that's the way of it, don't it?"

"That's just what it does."

For several minutes the two stood over the track, talking of what they suspected.

"Had we better tell anybody, Thad?"

"Well, no-o. Not yet awhile, I guess. Let's keep still about it till something else turns up."

"That's right. Might be some mistake, after all. You goin' to Mis' Tucker's wheat-cuttin' to-morr'?"

Thad nodded. "Yes, with my pa. You going?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Yessirree-Bob! Pa cain’t go, but I’m goin’ all right. He says I can. Ketch me stayin’ at home when there’s a chance to go anywheres!”

Early the following morning several persons left Fort Blocker for Mrs. Tucker’s farm. In one party were Mr. Wilkins and Marzee. They were in a two-horse wagon, and Mr. Dayberry was riding with them. The men sat on a plank seat in front, and the girl occupied a chair just behind them. Still farther back were two cradles and also two guns. Thad and Charley Dick, on horseback, rode behind the wagon.

Mrs. Tucker lived in the Cross Timbers, and her little farm was surrounded by woods. In fact, the farm itself was still woods. For the timber, instead of being cleared off, had merely been girdled. All over the cultivated land stood thickly the skeleton-like, deadened trees, many of their bare, bald trunks and limbs bleached almost as white as bones in the sunshine. But the land was low and the soil rich, and in spite of the standing trees the wheat crop—nearly all the farm had been sown to wheat—was remarkably fine.

As the little party from the fort drew near the hidden farm, the first sound that reached their ears was the ringing of a whetstone against a scythe. On driving up to the fence, they found several cradlers hard at work in the field. Soon Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Dayberry were also swinging their cradles.

Thad and Charley Dick went to binding at first; but when several men arrived to do the binding, the boys turned to shocking the bound grain. Some smaller boys were helping them.

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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The farm was longer than it was broad, and the wheatfield was almost square. The first cradlers to begin work had started in at the outer edge and cradled their swaths entirely around the wheat. Now they were working inward from the fence.

Soon other men arrived from the Menasco settlement; and at length more than a dozen cradlers, strung along at irregular intervals, were mowing their way around the grainfield. Nearly every man remarked that he had never seen better wheat, or even as good. At the lowest place it was almost waist deep to the cradlers, and in other places a foot deeper. And the heads were correspondingly long and heavy.

"The Widow Tucker will have plenty of wheat to bread her and her family," remarked Mr. Hendricks, one of the cradlers from Fort Blocker.

"Yes, and a good many bushels to sell, if she can get it all threshed out in good shape," agreed Mr. Beard, also from the fort.

Round and round the wheatfield the cradlers moved, the numerous cradlers devouring the thick, tall grain, but not so rapidly as they would have devoured lighter grain. And the binders kept almost at the cradlers' heels, picking up the wheat as fast as the cradles laid it down. Thad and the other boys also shocked the sheaves as soon as there were enough to make a shock. In addition to the shocking, Thad and Charley Dick found time to run to the house every round or two for a bucket of fresh water from the well.

The water-bucket was kept at the corner of the grainfield nearest the house, in the shade of a deadened

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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tree or of a wheat-shock. There the whetstones were also kept; and at the completion of his round each cradler would stop to drink and to whet his blade. And there, too, these pioneer harvesters had left their guns and six-shooters, as well as their powder-horns and ammunition-pouches.

When beginning work, most of the harvesters had expressed the opinion that their task would be completed by dinner-time. But the heavy wheat made heavier, slower work for cradlers, binders and shockers. And cutting around the many trees and a number of stumps also retarded the progress of the cradlers.

“What ails the dogs, I wonder?” Thad remarked to Charley Dick, while the two were busy standing bundles of wheat together in a shock. There were three or four dogs in the harvest-field.

“What do you mean, Thad? I hadn’t noticed anything.”

“Why, when wheat-cutting is going on, every dog is always out in the standing grain, hunting rabbits as hard as he can. But these dogs don’t seem to want to hunt.”

“No rabbits in this wheat, I guess,” was Charley Dick’s careless reply.

It was nearly an hour later when Thad happened to notice that the bristles along one dog’s back were standing angrily erect all the time; and the animal appeared uneasy. But some dogs act like that when strange dogs are around, and the boy thought little of it at the time. Afterwards, however, he recalled the fact distinctly.

Higher and higher climbed the sun, and still the busy

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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harvest scene went on. Round and round, round and round, round and round the encircling line of toilers revolved, every cradler shaving off a swath from the diminishing grainfield as he advanced. But noontime came, and a considerable patch of wheat, in the center of the field, still remained to be reaped.

Now Marzee Wilkins came out, accompanied by little Nanny Tucker, to inform the harvesters that dinner was almost ready. It would be on the table by the time they could wash and get ready to eat it.

Lieutenant Reel consulted with several of the men, and then sent back word that they preferred to finish their reaping first and eat afterwards.

Later Mrs. Tucker herself came out, to urge the men to eat at the usual time and complete their task after eating and resting. But they prevailed upon her to wait dinner till the wheat was all cut. So she returned to the house, and the song of the scythes went on, mingled with the harsh clanging of whetstones and the noisy hammering of woodpeckers on the dead trees.

Now the block of standing grain had decreased to an acre or two, and was almost completely surrounded by workmen.

"Does seem strange how the dogs keep out of that wheat," Charley Dick finally remarked to Thad.

"Yes. They dived in boldly enough at first, I noticed. But they soon got out, and they've never gone in again. They act just for all the world like they're out-and-out scared to venture in there."

"They do. Just watch 'em! All the time they keep their eyes turned t'wards the wheat—the standin'

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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wheat. They act juberous of it. That's plain to be seen."

"They must smell something in there they're afraid to tackle. Wonder what it can be."

"Do you s'pose it's a cat'mount, Thad? Or maybe there's another co'gar in there, like our big, belled feller!"

"Well, now, who knows? Might be the very same kind of a varmint lying hid in that wheat. Most dogs are mortally afraid of a co'gar."

"That's so. Watch wouldn't venture near that belled booger unless we went along. And Watch ain't half-way skeery."

It was as the two boys had said. The dogs seemed restless and uneasy, and at the same time both angry and afraid. They did not bark; but their bristles stood up, and some of them could be heard to utter scarcely audible growls from time to time. Now and then also, as the boys noticed, a dog would approach the edge of the unreaped grain, and stand sniffing the air and listening. But not one of them would venture an inch into the wheat now; nor did they go anywhere else to hunt. And when a horseman went galloping by the farm, not a dog ran to the fence to bark, as they would all ordinarily have done.

At last Thad, when he happened to be near enough, called his father's attention to the dogs' action. "Must be a co'gar in there, or some kind of a big, ugly booger," he declared.

Mr. Dayberry swung his cradle a few times more, then, after a glance behind, rested it on the ground.

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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While wiping his sweaty face on his sleeve, he looked over the patch of grain that was left, and then observed the dogs and their ill-tempered backs.

"Do act a right smart like they smelt somethin' they don't like," he admitted. "Powerful good hidin'-place for some big varmint in this wheat. A body would think, though, that the booger would have got up and dusted from there long before now."

"Maybe he didn't know how to git out, Mr. Dayberry," suggested Charley Dick. "Cradlers or somebody all around the patch now. So the varmint, whatever it is, just stays in there and keeps layin' low."

"That might be the way of it. If we thought there was raily a co'gar out there, or even a catamount, we ought to have our guns down here, instid of up yander by the water-bucket."

"Pa, hadn't we better go, Charley Dick and I, and fetch ours down here?"

The man glanced over the patch of thick, yellow grain, looking so peaceful in the May sunshine.

"Why, no; I ruther reckon it ain't worth while. 'Tain't no ways likely there's anything dangerous in there, anyhow. May just be a big snake, that the dogs feel a little skittish to tackle."

The next cradler was now close, and Mr. Dayberry fell to swinging his cradle again. The boys went on with their shocking. But they were suspicious of that patch of wheat, and kept their eyes on it.

"That there varmint, when he does jump out, will jump on top of some of us, apt as not," Charley Dick said.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“He might, if anybody happened to be in his way. If not, he’s more likely to make a straight shoot for the woods, I’m thinking. But, anyhow, I expect to keep my eyes open.”

“So do I.”

Round and round still moved the toiling reapers and binders, the patch of standing wheat growing steadily less. And the boys kept putting the sheaves together as fast as the binders got enough for a shock. While Thad and Charley Dick were rushing here and there, one of the little boys, who had been standing on a stump—Chunky Joe Wilson’s boy it was—came running to them to say:

“Thad, Thad, I saw—I thought I saw its head!”

“Saw what’s head, George?”

“Why, that big varmint’s head,” was the answer, in awed tones. “It—it poked its head up out of the wheat!”

“What did it look like—the head?”

“How do I know, Thad? It looked like—just like—like—I don’t know what.”

“But it must have looked like sump’n,” insisted Charley Dick. “Was it white, or red, or yaller, or—”

“No, it wasn’t. It was black. It looked black to me.”

“That’s funny,” Charley Dick said. “Cain’t be a co’gar. Co’gars ain’t black, heads or tails or any other part.”

“I never saw a black co’gar, or a black catamount, either. Still, guess there might be such a thing. Who knows?” answered Thad.

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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“No black co’gar did I ever set eyes on. And I never heard tell of one.”

“Well, most sheep are white, but sometimes there’s a black one among ’em. Did what you saw look like a co’gar’s head, George?” Thad inquired of the boy.

“How do I know? I never saw a co’gar. But—well—I guess—”

What little George Wilson guessed will never be known. For just at that moment Charley Dick, glancing over the standing wheat, saw something that almost made him jump off the ground.

“What was it—what did you see?” demanded Thad.

But Charley Dick ran to the nearest cradler. “Did—did you see anything out there just now, Mr. Cogburn?”

“See anything out where?” The man did not miss a stroke of his cradle.

“Why, out there in the wheat. I barely caught a glimpse of—of sump’n. I’d turned my head away, and just as I looked back it dodged down into the wheat.”

“And what did you see? What did it look like?” The cradler let his cradle rest for a few moments.

“That I couldn’t hardly tell. But it must have been somebody’s head. A nigger’s head it looked to me like.”

The man ran his eye over the acre or more of standing grain. “Reckon somebody’s runaway nigger could be hidin’ in there, Charley Dick?”

“Might be. Who knows?”

“Well, nigger or what not, we’ll see in a few minutes.” Mr. Cogburn began to swing his cradle again.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Charley Dick returned to Thad. "I'll just bet there's somebody's runaway nigger hidin' out there!"

"Where did you see 'im?"

"Right yander, almost ag'inst that big snag!" The boy was pointing to one of the largest trees in the field, and the most conspicuous. It differed from the others in that it had no top, and its great trunk, which towered up thirty or forty feet, was burned as black as a coal.

"Guess you just saw a knot on that old black tree."

"Think I cain't tell a knot from a nigger?" Charley Dick's tones trembled with indignation.

"Well, then, whose negro could it be?"

"How do I know that? The Lorin's have got niggers, and Uncle Wylie Jones has got niggers, and Uncle Josiah Jones has got niggers, and—and— It may be some of them."

"But what would a runaway negro be doing here in Mrs. Tucker's wheatfield?"

The other boy thought for a few moments. Then his face lighted up.

"I'll tell you, Thad. He didn't have anything to eat, that nigger didn't. Here he could rub out wheat with his hands and live on that. And there's a branch right down there to drink from. This tall wheat would make a bully hidin'-place, too. You couldn't find anybody in it unless you just stumbled onto 'em. Yes, sir! That's the very way of it. I'm mighty nigh certain it is."

"But if it's some black fellow, why didn't he slip out into the woods when the cradlers first started to work?"

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## THE WIDOW TUCKER'S WHEAT CROP

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"Maybe he didn't think about it till it was too late —till the hands got strung out all around the field."

"Yes, it might have been that way," admitted Thad. "Or maybe he didn't know there were so many of us, and s'posed it would take us several days to cut in to his hiding-place in the center of the field. Well, he can't hide much longer now. If we'd even stopped for dinner, he'd have had a chance to light out for the woods."

"Guess the pore creecher must be about half skeered to death by this time. Do you reckon he'll just lay still and let the cradlers find 'im? Or will he jump to his feet, suddenlike, and streak it for the fence?"

"I wonder which. But we'll soon find out. Won't take all these cradlers long to whittle up what little wheat's left."

While talking the boys had got a good many sheaves behind, and now they hurried their shocking to catch up. Round and round the shrinking grain-patch the harvesters swept, working rapidly. Already it was an hour past their accustomed dinner-time, and they were hungry and eager to get through. Soon the square of standing grain had shrunk to scarcely half an acre, surrounding that big, black snag.

Fast as the shockers shocked, they were not too busy to keep an eye on what was left of the grainfield. Usually the last few rounds of the cradlers scared out many frightened rabbits; but the boys were expecting bigger game to show itself here.

"Oh, I don't believe there's any runaway negro in there!" Thad exclaimed at length. "Must have been something else you saw, Charley Dick."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“But what else could it have been? It wasn't a catamount's head or a co'gar's head—that I know. And if it wasn't a nigger's head—”

Here, with the suddenness of a thunder-clap, fierce, wild war-whoops rang out! And at the same moment five dark, half-naked figures leaped up out of the wheat around the big black snag and, with drawn bows, started for the nearest woods!



## XX

### “IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!”

THE utter consternation of the harvesters at the sudden appearance of the yelling redskins as they bounded up from the standing wheat, is beyond words to describe. The bursting out of a volcano at the same place could scarcely have been more unexpected, or more astounding. Even Thad and the other shockers, though they had half believed that some man or animal was hiding in the unreaped grain, had not once suspected anything as frightful as this.

The events that followed were swift and perilous. Though more intent upon escaping than anything else, the five Comanches were in the midst of unarmed harvesters. And these savages, fully armed themselves, every one, were always fierce for white men's blood and scalps. The settlers' weapons being now more than a hundred yards away, they were, for a little while, well-nigh helpless.

But the frontiersmen quickly recovered from their paralyzing consternation. Scarcely had the red men started in one direction, when the harvesters on the opposite side of the wheat-patch dropped their cradles

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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and their armfuls of grain and made a wild dash for their guns. The important thing was to arm themselves as quickly as possible.

But the whites toward whom the savages were rushing had all they could do to save their own lives. Every savage of the five had sprung up out of the wheat with an arrow in his bow. The men in front of them retreated backwards, and several dodged behind tree-trunks. The boys, who were shocking happened to be exactly in the way the Comanches started. Two of the little fellows dived heads first into the standing wheat and stayed there. Two others dropped down and hid behind a big shock. Charley Dick took refuge on the far side of a high stump, and Thad put a tree-trunk between himself and the nearest redskin.

One of the binders had a heavy sheaf of wheat in his hands. Instead of dropping it when he saw an Indian aiming an arrow at him, he instinctively threw the sheaf up as a shield. The arrow struck the grain and passed through it. But the arrow's course was changed and it missed its intended victim by an inch.

Another Comanche made straight for Thad's father. Had the savage used his bow, he could have shot the white man down easily. But the red fellow had somewhere got possession of a knife more than two feet long, which, seeing that the harvester was unarmed, he was eager to use. Furiously he rushed at his intended victim. But Mr. Dayberry still had his cradle in his hands. Being desperate, he gave the cradle a swing. If the scythe-blade had struck, it would almost have severed the Indian's feet from his legs.

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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But the agile warrior leaped back in time to save himself. Now he quickly sheathed the big knife and threw up his bow and arrow. But the threatened man, still carrying his cradle, ran backwards and dodged behind a near tree-trunk. The Comanche followed, evidently bent upon murder. But as he was circling round the tree, a shot roared out above the savage war-whoops. One of the harvesters, as it happened, had been binding wheat with a six-shooter belted on. Leaping to a tree, he had opened fire on the nearest redskin, which happened to be the one that was trying to murder Mr. Dayberry.

The Indian, badly wounded, turned and fled toward the fence for his life; and the other warriors fled with him. By this time several of the white men had got to their weapons and were now coming back at a run. These and the man with the six-shooter promptly opened fire on the retreating savages.

All the Indians reached the fence. Four of them vaulted over it and disappeared. But the wounded warrior stopped when astride the topmost rail and, eager for revenge, began to let fly arrow after arrow at the pursuing whites. They promptly sprang to trees, and several rifles and shotguns roared out deafeningly. The warrior tumbled back into the field and lay motionless.

By this time the rest of the whites had reached their guns and six-shooters and armed themselves. Now they ran to the fence, not where the Indians had crossed it, but farther up, sprang over into the thick woods, and cautiously approached the spot where the four Indians

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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had disappeared. But not a red man was to be found. Nor could they be found for several hundred yards around. Undoubtedly they had fled into the depths of the forest. Finally the white men returned to the field.

Both Thad and Charley Dick, after arming themselves, had joined the party that pursued the savages. As they returned, all stopped for a look at the dead Comanche. Hideous in his war-paint, the savage lay as he had fallen, with his powerful bow still clutched in his left hand. Leaving him lying there, the white party went on to the still standing wheat-patch. One of the harvesters, it was known, had been seriously wounded.

They found him sitting on the ground, with his back against a tree. And the little boys were standing by him. There was an arrow deeply imbedded in his side. His name was Brown. He was not one of the party from the fort, but lived a mile or two farther in the Cross Timbers.

"Somebody will have to ride for Doc Bailey," announced Lieutenant Reel, after a look at the wounded man.

"I'll go! Let me go!" spoke up Thad. Others also volunteered. But the lieutenant said:

"I think Thad can make the ride as quick as anybody, and maybe quicker. That slim young nag of his looks like a traveler to me. Is it all right for the boy to go, Dayberry?"

Thad's father nodded. "If he wants to."

Thad now hurried off toward the house. Arriving there, he found Mrs. Tucker and Marzee Wilkins out

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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in the yard, with some neighbor women who were helping prepare dinner. They had heard the yells and shots and had seen the Indians running. All were very much excited, but as yet they knew little of what had actually happened. Thad told them in as few words as possible, then ran for his horse.

Marzee followed him to the fence. "Thad, where are you going?" she cried.

"For the doctor for Mr. Brown. They're bringing 'im to the house now." The boy was throwing the saddle on his horse.

"But—but it's not safe for you to go, Thad! Those Indians will kill you!"

"It's catching before killing. Ped will tell the red boogers good-by!"

In a very few minutes he had girted his saddle fast, slung his rifle to the saddle-horn, and was mounted and galloping away.

Soon the harvesting party came from the field. The wounded harvester was able to walk, but a man was supporting him by each arm. The feathered shaft still protruded from his side. It was thought best to let the doctor remove that. Oherwise the steel spike, which was loosely fastened, might be left in the wound.

The man was placed on a bed, and all the others stood around, in the house or out in the yard, waiting anxiously; though they said not a word as to why they were anxious. The Comanches had been known to use poisoned arrows. If they had done so in this case, symptoms of the poison would soon manifest themselves.

But after half an hour or longer the wounded man

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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declared that he felt no worse. It was at his urging that the other men sat down and ate their dinner. The table was spread out in the yard, in the shade of a big post-oak.

After dinner a few of the men went back down into the field, to finish cutting the wheat. But all who had come horseback armed themselves and started out to see if they could follow the Indians' trail.

Those who finished the wheat found, near the big burnt snag, the places where the five warriors had lain in hiding. Why had they concealed themselves there? That was the question that everybody was asking everybody else, but nobody could answer it.

From this position Mrs. Tucker's house, which stood on higher ground but a few hundred yards away, could be plainly seen. That the savages had been here to watch the house, and that they had had hostile designs against the family, could not be doubted.

A few years later, and not many miles from this place, something similar occurred. The Comanches, who had learned from bloody experience the danger of attacking a house that had defenders, concealed themselves near by and kept watch, perhaps for a whole day, upon a cabin where a numerous family lived. Having assured themselves that the men were all away from home, the savages waited till night, when the family were asleep, then burst in and murdered them all, except two. That the five warriors hiding in the wheat-field had similar designs upon Mrs. Tucker's family can not be doubted. The timely arrival of the harvesters prevented the carrying out of the bloody plot.

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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When the reapers had finished cutting, binding and shocking the wheat, they went back to the house. By this time Thad had returned, with Dr. Bailey. The doctor was now busy removing the arrow. When the missile was out, spike and all, he pronounced the wound a serious one, but not necessarily fatal. Later the wounded man was taken home in a wagon by one of his neighbors. He was disabled for several weeks, but eventually recovered.

After an hour or two, those who had gone in pursuit of the fleeing warriors returned. Not an Indian had they seen.

"But we struck their trail, and followed it to where they'd had their horses hid out," Lieutenant Reel reported to those who had not gone. "The nags seemed to have been tied there several hours—from some time last night, I'd say. When we roused the five out of the wheatfield, they made tracks for their horses, and then mounted and traveled from there as fast as they could ride."

"Ought to be easy to follow the horses' trail through these sandy woods," somebody suggested.

"Yes, and some of us are going to follow it," the lieutenant answered. "But they've already got a few hours' start; and I don't expect much to come of the chase. Anybody can make a trail faster than anybody else can track it through these woods. But we'll try. And I'm going to start a runner out to the scouts, to warn 'em to be on the watch-out. But with night now only a few hours off, the chances are that the boogers will outride us."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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The runner was started promptly, and several men rode away on the Indians' trail. Alarmed at the danger that had hung over her family and herself, Mrs. Tucker quickly decided not to stay on her farm another night. There were two wagons here from the fort, Mr. Wilkins's and Mr. Hendricks's, and her household goods and the family were soon loaded upon those.

Before starting home, Dr. Bailey and others, including the women and Marzee, walked down into the field for a look at the dead Indian. The warrior was still lying in the wheat-stubble, where he had fallen.

"Who claims this fellow? Who killed 'im?" inquired the doctor.

"Nobody claims 'im, I guess, Doc," Mr. Dayberry answered. "Sever'l of the boys took a pop at 'im. No tellin' who hit 'im and who didn't."

"For years I've been wanting a skeleton to wire together. But not being a robber of graveyards, I've never yet got hold of one. This looks to me like it's my chance—a whizzing good chance."

It was Mr. Wilkins that answered: "Just help yourself to the red feller, Doc. He's yo'r'n for the packin' home."

"I'd like to have his bow," spoke up Thad.

"Yes, Thad's welcome to the bow and arr's," Mr. Wilkins said.

So the boy took the trophies he wanted, and later put them into Mr. Wilkins's wagon. A settler who had come with his wagon and team drove down into the field and loaded the dead Indian in. Soon the whole place was about to be deserted. Dr. Bailey and the Indian-

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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hauler drove away toward the doctor's home, and the other settlers scattered homeward. The fort people, with Mrs. Tucker and her household goods, were ready to start to Fort Blocker.

Mrs. Tucker had an unusual quantity of furniture, and particularly of chairs. Her brother-in-law—the brother of her dead husband—made his home with the family when he stayed at home. He had a turning-lathe, and was a chair-maker. That is, he made the wooden frames of the chairs. The settlers usually bought the framework and put the bottoms in themselves, of rawhide. Just now this man was off with a wagon and team, nobody knew where, peddling out a large stock of chairs that he had made while at home.

The Tucker family would ride on the Hendricks wagon. But by the time the men had got through loading Mr. Wilkins's wagon, and had put the cradles and numerous chairs on top, Marzee looked up at the load in dismay.

"Don't see where I'm going to ride," she said.

"No room for you up there. Guess you'll have to ride behind me."

The girl looked at Thad's horse. "Will Ped carry double?"

"That he will! I've tried 'im."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't he kick up if I got on behind you?"

"Not a kick-up! Ped's not a kick-up horse. He's only part Texas stock. He's got good Kentucky blood in 'im, Ped has. His mammy was brought from Tennessee."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Then, if you don’t mind, and pa says I can—”

“Of course I won’t mind. I’d rather have you ride behind me than not.”

The girl ran round to her father. Soon she came back to report:

“He says I may ride behind you if you’ll keep right along with the wagon.”

“Why, yes; of course I will. Climb up on a fence-corner, Marzee.”

While the girl was mounting the fence, Thad ungirted his saddle and unfolded his saddle-blanket, so that a clean part of it would cover the horse behind the saddle. Then he got his gun, mounted, and after fastening the leather that held the gun to the saddle-horn, he rode up to the fence. The girl sprang on.

“You’d better hold tight to me, Marzee. Take a grip on my belt,” Thad advised. For, after getting fixed in her sidewise seat, the girl had tried to hold to the hind part of the saddle.

“Maybe that will be better,” she said, taking a good grasp on the leather.

The wagons soon started, Mr. Hendricks in the lead and Mr. Wilkins behind. Thad rode along just in the rear of the Wilkins wagon.

Charley Dick remained back with Thad and Marzee for a mile or two, while they talked of the recent exciting happenings. Later Charley Dick passed the wagons and pushed ahead, to where several men from the fort were riding as a guard for the wagons. Thad was still bringing up the rear.

When the wagons came to Clear Creek, a larger

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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stream than Blocker, they went on across and climbed the bank beyond. But Ped, thirsty after his rapid ride for the doctor, plunged into a rather deep pool by the side of the ford. Not till the stirrups and Thad's bare feet were under water did the horse stop and begin to drink.

"Not afraid of getting your feet wet, are you, Marzee? Ped likes to wade out into deep water when he drinks."

"Of course I'm not afraid. They're not wet yet, but they're going to be. Maybe I can splash some of the dust off."

Holding to Thad's belt with one hand, she leaned over and with the other began to wash her feet. And she kept on till they were white and clean. Thad took his feet out of the stirrups and kicked and splashed in the cool, clear water till all the loose dirt was off.

The horse had quenched his thirst by this time, and the pair rode on. The wagons could still be heard, but were a good distance ahead.

"S'pose some redskins were to get after us while we're away back here by ourselves," suggested the girl, glancing off, a little timidly, into the thick woods.

"Ped would soon carry us to safety. He can run. He's got race-stock in him, Ped has. Want to gallop a little, Marzee?"

"Just as lieve as not."

So Ped was urged to a gallop. And he kept galloping till they had overtaken the wagons. Then they rode along behind, at a walk.

"Charley Dick has left us. Don't you wish you'd

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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let me ride on the wagon, so you could have gone on ahead with the men?"

"No, I don't. It's fun to ride double."

"Is it always fun, Thad?"

"Well, I recollect one time when it wasn't so overly funny. I mean when Charley Dick and I rode over here to the woods for that hog."

The girl laughed, softly. "And wasn't there another time, Thad?"

"Don't recollect it. That was the last time I've done any double riding—till now."

"No, not the last. You forget when you and poor little Frizzly rode in from the prairie together."

Now Thad laughed. "I wasn't thinking of that time. No, that wasn't such great fun as it might have been. To make it real fun, you must be riding with somebody you like."

"Then don't you wish you had somebody behind that you like, instead of me hanging to you?"

"Somebody I like!" Thad tried to stare at the girl over his shoulder. "Where am I to find anybody I like better than you, Marzee—or as well?"

"Do you like me, Thad?" The girl spoke without a trace of self-consciousness. But she spoke very softly.

"Why, of course I do!"

"How long have you been liking me?"

"Oh, ever so long—since the first day I saw you. Didn't you know that, Marzee?"

"Well, I thought maybe you did. You've always been nice to me. And when a boy is nice to a girl she thinks he likes her, whether he does or not."

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## "IT'S FUN TO RIDE DOUBLE!"

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"Well, you thought right this time. Don't you like me, Marzee?"

"Why, yes; of course I do," the girl answered, in a matter-of-fact way. "Why shouldn't I?"

"And you'll be a good friend of mine, won't you, and let me be your friend?"

"Certainly. We're already good friends, it seems to me."

"Good friends, yes. But I want you to be my best friend, and like me better than anybody else."

"I'll be your best friend if you want me to. But—but if I liked any boy better than anybody else, nobody would ever find it out, let alone the boy. If you were a girl, now, it would be different."

"Yes, but little good that does me, Marzee—don't you see? I'm not a girl; and I'm not expecting to turn to a girl any time soon. And I want you to like me better than anybody else at all."

"I never would tell any boy I liked him that way."

"I don't see why, when I like you best. And I'm not scared to say so."

"But that's different. You're a boy."

"But I don't see why you won't like me best, Marzee. Did you never tell Buck Thompson you liked him best?"

"No, I didn't! I never even told him I liked 'im at all. And I don't, either—now. And I never will again—never!"

As Thad well knew, Marzee and Buck had quarreled. And he knew the reason. Well pleased, he wisely decided to let matters stand as they were.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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When the party entered the fort, Thad rode up close to the Wilkins cabin, and the girl alighted on her own door-sill.

“It’s great fun to ride double—don’t you think so, Marzee?”

“Yes, I do,” she laughingly agreed.

During the next several days Thad was unusually cheerful. It was astonishing, even to him, that the friendship and liking of one shy, soft-voiced little girl could go so far toward making a boy light-hearted. If there was anything of sentiment—anything more than mere liking—in their mutual friendship, neither was aware of the fact. But they told each other their little secrets; and if either had anything worth dividing, it was sure to be shared with the other.

Their close friendship was very pleasant, and Thad, at least, delighted in it. And it was well for him to bask in the sunshine of the girl’s favor while he could. The time was nigh when she would scornfully refuse to speak to him, or even to look at him.



## XXI

### WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

AFTER an absence of two or three days, the scouts under Lieutenant Reel, who had followed the fleeing war-party's trail from the Tucker place, returned to Fort Blocker on jaded horses. They had not caught a glimpse of an Indian. But that was to have been expected.

Mrs. Tucker and her children remained nearly a week with the Wilkinses, and then passed over to the next door west and spent about a week with the Dayberrys. Afterwards they were taken care of by other families till a house in the fort became vacant. Then they moved into that and continued to live there.

A few days after the harvesting of Mrs. Tucker's wheat, Thad's and Charley Dick's fathers, together with a number of other men, were ordered out on a scout. Marzee's father was also one of the party.

The weather was now warm, and Thad and Charley Dick planned to do what several of the other settlers had already done—build brush-sheds to shade their front doors. There being no trees inside the square, something of the kind seemed very necessary.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Not a little work was connected with the undertaking. Forked posts had to be cut and set in the ground in front of the houses. Poles were now laid with one end in a fork and the other end between the house-logs, under the eaves. Across these other poles were placed, and on the whole green limbs and bushes, cut and hauled in the ox-wagon, were piled till they were several feet thick; and not the tiniest sun-spot could find its way through. The green leaves would shrivel up and the brush would settle down, but they would still make a compact shade.

After erecting a big shed over Thad's front door, the two boys passed on to the south side of the square and set up a similar shed against the Sheegog cabin. Then they made still a third shed for the Wilkinsons.

As soon as a shed was completed, the family moved their table out into its shade. From this time on till cool weather—except when rain was falling—they would eat out of doors. It was also too warm now to cook inside; and during the rest of the summer the big fire-places would be unused—would be kept filled with green bushes to hide their ugliness, in fact. All the cooking would be done on camp-fires kindled just beyond the outer edges of the brush-sheds.

“Now this is better,” declared Thad, after the family had seated themselves for their first meal out in the cool shade.

When Mr. Dayberry returned from scouting, he and Thad went up and “laid by” their crops—gave them a final hoeing and plowing. After that, needing some new wheat to take to mill, they beat out a few bushels

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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with flails, and winnowed it—separated the grain from the chaff—by pouring it from a bucket to a wagon-sheet in a high wind. Then they sacked the wheat and hauled it down to the fort.

Tim Hart's ox-mill did not attempt to make flour. But a day's travel away, down in Denton County, was a steam-mill, owned by a man named Keep, which ground wheat for all this part of the country. And to Keep's mill they proposed to take their new grain.

Mr. Dayberry had intended to go himself; but by considerable persuasion Thad and Charley Dick got permission to make the trip.

So one morning they put Spot and Jerry, Mr. Dayberry's oxen, to the wagon, got the wagon-sheet and bows on, to keep their grist dry in case of rain, and drove away. Besides the few bushels of the Dayberry wheat, the wagon carried a few bushels more for Mr. Sheegog and Mr. Wilkins, and a two-bushel sack each for Uncle Johnny McDaniel, for Mr. Welborn and for Mr. Trueblood. The frontiersman seldom went to mill for himself alone, unless he went horseback.

One day the boys spent going. The weather being warm, the oxen were allowed to jog along at their own deliberate gait, and the sun was setting when the wagon arrived at its destination. The mill stood on a creek-bank, out in the woods, and the boys went into camp near by. A number of other wagons were camped close to the mill. Some of these had traveled two or three days. Most of the owners came over, from time to time, to talk with the boys from Fort Blocker. And the boys visited the other camps to hear the news from

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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other parts of the country. Wherever they went, most of the talk was of Indian raids.

All the following day the two boys waited for their grinding; for there was much grain ahead of theirs. It was dusk when the last sack that belonged to them was ready to load.

Early on the third morning they yoked their oxen, put them to the wagon-tongue, and drove up to the mill-door. When all their sacks had been loaded, they set out for home.

The shadow of that big hill to the west had already spread its coolness over the whole fort when the ox-wagon rolled into the square. Now the boys drove from house to house, distributing their load. Each man who had sent wheat received his flour in one sack, the "seconds" and "shorts" in another, with a string tied between, and the bran in a third sack.

While the Dayberry family were at supper, under the brush-shed, Thad related his experiences. That being the first steam-mill he had ever seen, he was full to overflowing of things to tell. After supper he passed over to the Wilkins front yard, where Marzee was straining milk on the table, and repeated them all to her. A very eager listener the girl proved.

"I tell you, Marzee, it's great fun to go to mill!" he assured her, in conclusion.

"Oh, I just know it must be, Thad! How I do wish I could see a steam-mill! Pa has half-way promised to take me to Keep's mill some time. When he gets ready to go, though, it's always too cold or too hot, or there's too much danger of Indians, or something. So

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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I have to mope around home. I never do get to go anywhere or see anything!"

The next day or two Thad and his father spent hauling firewood, to cook with, from the Cross Timbers. Then Mr. Dayberry, Mr. Wilkins, Mr. Sheegog and others rode away for another two weeks of scouting. Now Thad had little to do but milk, look after Ped, carry water from the spring, help his mother on wash-days, and chop wood. As the wood was burnt on a camp-fire out of doors, not much chopping was needed. Sometimes the boy mounted his horse and rode up to the farm for a sack of roasting-ears and other vegetables. Occasionally, too, he made a similar trip up to the Wilkins place for Mrs. Wilkins. The rest of the time he had to amuse himself as he pleased.

The principal amusements of the fort boys were hunting and swimming. Most of the game was not fat at this time of the year, and hunting was more or less neglected. But the weather was unusually oppressive, even for the summer season, and the swimming went on early and late.

The best swimming-hole, both long and deep, was more than a mile down the creek. But the boys cared nothing for the walk, and the warmer the weather grew the oftener they went. And nobody went oftener or stayed longer than did Thad Dayberry and Charley Dick Sheegog.

One sultry morning almost every boy from the fort was down there. After swimming long enough, they began to come out on the east bank to dress, one or two at a time. While Buck Thompson was getting into his

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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clothes, he looked over into the field that occupied the valley on the west side of the creek, and said:

“But don’t I wish I had one of Old Man Harbolt’s fat watermelons to fill up on about now!”

“You’d better fight shy of Harbolt’s melons, Buck. He’s got a big pea-patch planted, they say,” Thad remarked.

“Think so, smarty?” sneered Buck, his face reddening. For every boy was laughing. The mention of a pea-patch was a very pointed allusion to some recent happenings.

Harbolt, the owner of the farm, instead of moving up to the fort, was still living here, his house standing over at the far edge of the field, at the foot of a hill. Whatever his faults, he was a good farmer. One evidence of that was that he owned the best peach-orchard in the country. It was known that he had ripe peaches from May till frost.

But, unlike most frontier people, he kept them all to himself. Once, earlier in the season, two or three of the fort boys had gone to his house and asked him for some peaches.

“Raise your own peaches, you lazy rascals!” Harbolt answered, angrily. “Feller would think mine’s the only land that a peach-tree will grow on! I’ve got somethin’ better to do than raisin’ peaches for such as you!”

It was only a few nights after this that three or four boys from the fort, led by Buck Thompson, had made a secret raid on Harbolt’s orchard, which was over near the house. They obtained not a single peach.

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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What they did get was the contents of Harbolt's double-barrel shotgun, and a chasing out of the orchard.

The gun had been charged with something light, supposed to be peas. They did little serious harm, but stung frightfully. And Buck, who got most of the two charges, had his hands and face covered with red spots for days.

Harbolt was not popular; and, as in most country communities, stealing a few peaches to eat was never considered sure-enough stealing. But to be shot and chased out of somebody's orchard was a sensationally good joke. Ever since the facts had become known, Buck and the other unfortunate boys had been pelted with ridicule wherever they went. Charley Dick detested Buck, and Thad was not very fond of him. And nobody had furnished more of the ridicule than these same two boys.

Marzee, learning what had caused those red spots, had refused to have anything more to do with Buck Thompson after that.

"Boys that get shot stealing can't be friends of mine," she informed that crestfallen youth, indignantly. And from that time on she would seldom so much as speak to him.

Soon after this it was that Marzee and Thad became such good friends. Thad knew, as did every other boy and girl in the fort, just how the peach-stealing experience had brought about the quarrel. If he had only been wise enough to profit by it!

Soon Buck went on, speaking to Thad: "Talk's cheap, but you'd be skeered to death to set foot inside

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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of Harbolt's field, let alone help yourself to some of his peaches or watermelons!"

"Bet you a dollar I wouldn't be afraid!" hurled back Thad, resenting the charge of cowardice. "I could go all over Harbolt's field if I felt like it, and eat the finest melon in his patch if I was hungry for melon," he declared, rather rashly.

Buck laughed in a taunting way. "Hear 'im talk—just hear Thaddy Blowhard talk! Bet you he wouldn't dare set foot inside of Harbolt's melon-patch!"

"Could if I wanted to."

"Then let's see you! I dare you to!"

"But I don't want to."

"Oh, no! He don't want to! I just knowed he wouldn't want to! Nobody wants to when he's afeard!"

"But I'm not afraid," protested Thad.

"Then we'll see whether you are or not. I dare you—double-dare you—double-dog-dare you, to go into that field and fetch me out a melon!"

In boy language that was a terrible dare. Thad was usually a sensible boy. But he had his share of boyish weaknesses. And like most persons, grown-up people as well as younger ones, there were occasions when he was not so sensible as usual. This time he answered more sensibly than he felt:

"Steal your own melons if you want 'em! I've got something better to do. When I carry out melons, it'll be for myself!"

"Carry out melons! Carry out melons! Why, little boy, if Harbolt was to ketch you in that melon-patch, and so much as crook his finger at you, you'd faint

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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away!" Buck pronounced the last words in a high-pitched voice, a sort of girlish squeak.

Thad returned a defiant, taunting answer. Most of the other boys were now amusing themselves by skating flat stones on the water. Thad and Charley Dick tried that for awhile, then strolled away up the creek by themselves. As they moved along the top of the rather high hill which rose not far back from the east bank, Thad, looking down upon Harbolt's farm, remarked:

"I wouldn't be afraid to go over and fetch a melon out of that patch if I wanted to."

"Reckon you could, Thad? One would taste purty nice about now." Charley Dick smacked his lips. "And wouldn't it be a bully good joke on Harbolt?"

"And it would stop Buck Thompson's big mouth," said Thad, who resented, more than he had shown, that taunt of cowardice. No boy likes to be called a coward; and frontier boys were especially sensitive on that subject. The taunt was rankling even yet.

Most of the settlers living in the fort, being too far from their farms to keep the crows away, had not planted any melons this year. The Blocker Creek valleys above here, as well as the other prairie-creek valleys, were very black—the "black-waxy" land. But the watermelon, like the sweet potato and the goober-pea, dearly loves a sandy soil. Part, if not all, of Harbolt's field was very sandy, and he always raised fine melons. This year, as could be seen from the hill where the boys were standing, he had a good-sized, thrifty-looking patch.

Most of the settlers planted a patch of cotton every

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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year, for spinning and weaving. But Harbolt had a strip of twenty or thirty rows running all the way from the creek to the house. Above the cotton was oat-stubble and below it wheat-stubble. About midway between the creek and the house—far enough from the house to be safe from the melon-loving chickens—was the melon-patch. Watermelons and cotton grow well together, and the melons had been planted in the cotton-rows. The cotton was rather low as yet, and not only could the thrifty melon-vines be seen from the hill, but here and there a big melon appeared, showing its fat, striped back above the vines.

Strolling slowly along, Charley Dick and Thad talked of the melons in sight. And the longer they talked, the hungrier they grew for melon. Before they were past the farm, they saw its owner, a great, overgrown, ungainly fellow, walking down from the house toward the melon-patch.

“He noticed us over here, and he’s comin’ down to make shore his precious watermelons are safe,” Charley Dick remarked.

“Just the same, I could get all the melons there that I could carry out—if I wanted to.”

“Maybe you could, Thad, and maybe you couldn’t.”

“May-bees don’t fly in July. It wouldn’t take much to make me raid that melon-patch, just for the fun of the thing, and to show Buck and the other boys what I can do. I’m half starved for watermelon anyhow.”

“So am I,” admitted Charley Dick. “A big, cool feller, with a red heart, would taste mighty good a sizzlin’ day like this.”

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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All the way back to the fort there was talk of the same kind. And the longer the two boys talked of watermelon, the more their souls yearned for watermelon. They had as yet no real expectation of robbing the melon-patch. But they kept telling each other how easily they could rob it if they wanted to. They were dallying with temptation—a dangerous thing to do.

Next day, not long after dinner, Thad and Charley Dick went down to the big swimming-hole and had a good swim, by themselves. While on their way home they looked over into the melon-patch and could plainly make out several big melons. The weather was hot and the boys were thirsty.

“We could get one if we wanted to,” Thad remarked.

“Then let’s do, Thad. Let’s slip over there and slip out a big one apiece.”

“We could, but—but I don’t just like—it makes a fellow feel kind of funny to think of—of going straight in and taking something that—that don’t belong to ’im,” answered Thad, weakly.

“Shucks! Slippin’ a few melons out of an old skin-flint’s patch ain’t stealin’!” declared Charley Dick, rendered bold by his combined hunger and thirst for watermelon.

“Reckon it must be something akin to it,” Thad argued, still rather weakly.

“No, it ain’t! It ain’t even thirty-third cousin to stealin’! I know just lots and lots of men that went into melon-patches when they got thirsty and busted a ripe melon and et it. But they wouldn’t shore-nough steal—narry one of ’em wouldn’t. It would only be a good

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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joke on Harbolt for us to take a melon apiece. Serve 'im just right, too, for bein' so stingy. And wouldn't it be a fine thing to tell Buck and the other boys—that we'd up and done what they wouldn't dare do? We could even show 'em the empty rinds."

This argument appealed to Thad. That taunt of cowardice was still rankling.

A few minutes later the two boys, with their eyes on Harbolt's cabin, half a mile away, were going cautiously down the hill toward the creek. Wading across at a shallow place, they climbed the far bank. Just at the top of the bank stood the rail-fence. After another glance at the house, without seeing anybody, they slipped over between the fence and the rider and dropped to the ground. They were now in the same strip of cotton that the melons were in. But the melons were still a few hundred yards away.

The cotton being not very tall, the only way to reach the melons without exposing themselves was to crawl on their hands and knees. That the boys at once proceeded to do.

Now that he had launched out upon the venture, Thad took the lead. Charley Dick came close behind. On they crawled, between two cotton-rows. The midday sun blazed hotly down on their thinly clad backs, and especially on their necks and the backs of their heads. But they crawled on steadily, resolutely, with a determination worthy of a better cause.

Those few hundred yards seemed to stretch out to a few miles. So hot was the dry ground that it almost blistered the boys' hands and knees as they crept along.

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## WATERMELONS ON THE SANDY LAND

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But at last they found themselves among watermelon vines.

“You crawl over that way, Charley Dick, and I’ll crawl to the right. Pick out a melon in the shade of some cotton-stalks if you can. It’ll be cool.”

“All right. Here goes!”

Not daring to stand up so that they could see over the cotton, the boys had to keep crawling about till they happened upon what they were in search of.

“I’ve found one!” Charley Dick’s voice soon announced. “Now to see if she’s ripe!”

Vigorous thumping was heard, every thump ringing out distinctly.

“Green as a gourd! Don’t bother that!” Thad told him.

Both crawled on. There were plenty of melons, and many of good size. But it was early in the season and most of them were “green.” But at last, after perhaps half an hour of crawling about in the broiling sun, the boys had a big one apiece that thumped ripe and felt cool.

Now they started back toward the creek, crawling as they had come, and rolling their melons before them.

“Ain’t mine a beauty, Thad?” The two were crawling along side by side, with only a cotton-row between them.

Thad peeped between the cotton-stalks. “Yes, but not a bit nicer-looking than mine.”

On they crawled, at their slow pace; over the hundreds of yards of blistering, sandy ground. Sometimes one of them would put a hand or a knee on a cockle-bur

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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or a grass-bur, and have to stop with a suppressed cry of pain, to pull the sticker out. Down between the cotton-rows there was no breeze, and the sweat was actually dripping from the boys' faces. Indeed, their whole bodies were wet with it.

"That sun would roast a turkey-aigg!" Charley Dick declared once.

"It has already roasted my back," answered Thad.

On they crawled, and on and on and on. The distance seemed endless.

"Yonder's the fence at last!" announced Thad. He had caught a glimpse of it about fifty yards ahead.

"My, but I'm glad! Won't we have a jolly time stuffin' ourselves when we do once git these big, juicy fellers off in a shady place? Believe I can make away with this whole melon. Never was so thirsty in all my born days, seems to me like. And I never was so hungry for melon, either."

"Same over here. I'll clean this fat fellow out and scrape the rind, I guess. Fact is—"

Hearing a suspicious noise close behind, Thad paused in his melon-rolling to glance over his shoulder. Next moment he had leaped to his feet and was yelling lustily:

"Run, Charley Dick! Run! run! He's after us—he's right after us!"



## XXII

### RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

CHARLEY DICK needed no second warning. Up he bounded, and, their hard-earned booty forgotten, the two young melon-thieves fled toward the fence in wild terror. Every moment they expected to hear the roar of a shotgun. One glimpse only had they caught of their pursuer, and that showed him almost upon them. After that they dared not so much as glance back.

Harbolt carried no weapon; but he came tearing after them as fast as his big, lubberly figure could get through the cotton. And he could run surprisingly well for his size.

Terror seemed to lend the fugitives wings. They reached the rail-fence and tumbled over between the fence and the rider. But the hindmost got through just in time to elude Harbolt's outstretched hands.

After that they splashed across the creek and fled on through the woods and brush which grew along the east bank. Very glad were they to escape with whole skins.

Harbolt followed only as far as the fence. There he bellowed after them:

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“You low-down, thievin’ boogers! If I ever ketch you inside of my field ag’in, I’ll give you somethin’ that’ll make you sick for a month!”

The two boys heard, but not for a moment did they slacken speed. They kept in the shelter of the woods. And not till they had run half a mile, and were about to drop with heat and exhaustion, did they dare pause to breathe.

After listening a few minutes for pursuing footsteps, they sat down on a big log in the shade of an oak and began to fan their red, sweaty faces with their hats. Their whole bodies were rising and falling with their heavy breathing. And their eyes were gazing anxiously back the way they had come.

Several minutes passed before either spoke. Charley Dick was the first to break the silence:

“How in this round world did that big booger find out there was anybody in his melon-patch?”

“Just what I’d like to know. But it’s too much for me.” Thad shook his head, in despair of ever solving the mystery.

“Reckon him or some of his folks heared us talkin’?”

“Away up there at the house? No, of course they didn’t.”

Suffering tortures from thirst, the two now walked over to the creek, where they lay down, with their faces to the water, and drank and drank and drank.

“To think of us rollin’ them two big, cool, juicy melons almost to the fence, and then havin’ to come here and swig down a lot of hot creek-water!” moaned Charley Dick, between drinks.

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## RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

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After quenching his thirst, Thad waded the creek and climbed the west bank. From there he could look down and across Harbolt's field.

"Yes, I saw 'im," he reported, on coming back. "He was walking up toward the house, with your melon under one arm and mine under the other."

"The stingy old skinflint!" exclaimed Charley Dick, in exasperation.

Being still very warm, the boys threw off their clothes and plunged into the creek at the nearest deep place. When cool, they came out and dressed, and then strolled on toward the fort.

"But wouldn't Buck Thompson crow like a rooster if he knowed we'd been chased out of Harbolt's field? If he onct finds out, we'll never hear the last of it—never!"

"And he'll find out, too," Thad answered, gloomily. "Harbolt will be just dead certain to tell."

"Wisht there was some way to git melons in spite of Harbolt."

"Well, maybe there is. Believe I know a way already."

"How, Thad?"

Thad explained his plan. And, as they walked on toward the fort, they talked it over. By the time they were entering the square they had resolved to try it.

Just at dusk that night the two boys got together again and strolled down toward the spring. They passed behind the Wilkins cabin instead of in front of it. For some reason Thad did not care to be seen by Marzee.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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At the spring the two climbed the far bank. Then they set off down the creek, following along the west side. Later they crossed back to the east bank. In due time they found themselves by Harbolt's field-fence, at the place where they had entered the field that afternoon.

Still and starlight was the night. The boys looked up the cotton-rows as far as they could see, which was not very far, but could discover nothing to alarm them. They also listened, but heard no suspicious sound. Then they climbed over the fence and started up the cotton-rows, walking cautiously and noiselessly. When they spoke, it was only in whispers; for they had resolved that this time no carelessness of theirs should betray them to the melons' owner.

But just as they came to the edge of the melon-patch, Thad, who was in the lead, made a warning gesture and suddenly dropped to the ground. His companion did the same.

"What's the matter?" whispered Charley Dick, after they had been lying there a minute or two.

"I saw somebody!"

"Somebody! Who was it, Thad?"

"Harbolt, it looked to me like."

"I don't hear anybody."

"Neither do I. I'm going to take a peep."

After removing his hat, Thad slowly raised his head, higher and higher, till he could look over the tops of the cotton-stalks. But he quickly dodged down again.

"Yes, he's there, Charley Dick! And he's got his gun too!"

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## RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

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"Then, let's put out from here, before he takes a notion to walk down this a way!"

"Yes, we'd better. And that's all we *can* do."

So they started back toward the creek; but not as they had come. Much afraid of that gun, they were now crawling on their hands and knees. And, in spite of the sun's absence, the crawling was worse in the dark than it had been in daylight. For now the cockle-burs and other sharp things could not be seen and avoided, and hands and knees suffered fearfully. Aside from that, too, it was a long, tiresome crawl.

At last they reached the ends of the cotton-rows. But not till they had listened and looked, to make sure that the melons' owner was not close behind, ready to take a shot at them, did they dare stand upon their feet and climb over the fence.

"That man must lose a sight of sleep," Charley Dick broke the silence to remark, after they had put a safe distance between themselves and the guarded field.

"He certainly does," agreed the other boy in discouraged tones.

"Reckon he stays up all night, Thad?"

"Not unless he naps in the daytime. He couldn't. Nobody can do without sleep."

"Well, he don't do much nappin' in the daytime. That's certain and shore."

"No. Anyhow, not every day." Thad laughed ruefully. He was thinking of that daylight raid. They trudged on wearily to the fort.

For some reason the news that Thad and Charley Dick had been chased by Harbolt, and almost captured,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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did not get abroad, even among the boys and girls. The two friends had little doubt that the fact would become known sooner or later. And they were now eager to do something to save their standing with the other boys.

Next night they did nothing. But the second night, not long after dark, found them down near Harbolt's field again. Again they waded the creek, climbed the far bank and crawled cautiously over the rail-fence. Once more they made their noiseless way up the cotton-rows to the melon-patch. And again, to their fright and disgust, they discovered Harbolt's figure standing quietly on guard among his melons.

Again, in fear and trembling, the two empty, but frightened, young melon-hunters dodged down between the cotton-rows, then crawled all those cockle-burry hundreds of yards back to the fence. And again they climbed over the fence, waded the creek and trudged their discouraged way up to the fort.

"Let's give it up as a bad job," said Charley Dick, when they were about to separate for the night.

"Never!" declared Thad. "We started out to get some melon, and not a bite—not so much as a good smell—have we had yet. We won't let up till we're outside of at least one good mess of watermelon."

"But we might get outside of sump'n else—sump'n we hain't bargained fur," suggested Charley Dick.

"What else?"

"I mean what's in Harbolt's shotgun."

"Shucks! Who's afraid of an old gun?"

"Well, I am for one."

"Of course. Everybody's afraid of a gun. What

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## RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

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I mean is, we'll get the melons without giving Harbolt a chance to shoot us. He can't stand there on guard all the time, day and night both. We'll raid the patch some time when he's up at the house."

The next day found the two boys still hungry for melon, and the following night found them in Harbolt's field again. Once more they stole up through the cotton to the melon-patch, only to discover that patient figure of their enemy standing there, with a gun on his arm, waiting for them. And once more they had to crawl back to the fence and return to the fort as melon-hungry as they had left it—ten times hungrier, if the truth must be told.

Twice again, under cover of darkness, they visited the melon-patch, only to find it guarded. By this time Charley Dick was much disheartened and wanted to abandon their purpose. But Thad, more determined, declared that he would keep trying as long as there was a melon in Harbolt's field.

Their next move was of Thad's planning. He spent the night with Charley Dick, and the two slept on some quilts in the loom-house loft. Two hours before dawn they donned their pantaloons, put on their hats and stole out of the loom-house and out of the fort. Half an hour later they were climbing over Harbolt's fence.

Feeling sure of finding the way clear this time, they walked boldly up the cotton-rows. But that same guard was on duty, standing now at the near edge of the watermelon-patch. And, as before, his gun was across his arm.

Believing that Harbolt would be at home and asleep,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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they had made some noise while approaching the melon-patch. And so frightened were they at the sight of their big, armed enemy that they dodged down and crawled back to the fence faster than they had ever crawled before.

Again they made their way back to the fort, disappointed, disgusted and out of temper. Even Thad was discouraged by this last failure.

"He never does sleep, the stingy old owl!" he said, when the two were in the loom-house loft again. "Looks like we might as well drop the whole business."

"So it looks to me," agreed Charley Dick. "Harbolt's too long-headed for us."

Probably they would not have tried again. But two days later they accidentally discovered the secret of Harbolt's perpetual watchfulness.

Late in the day the two tramped down to the big swimming-hole, alone, and night was coming on when they slipped into their old clothes and started home. Looking from the hill over into Harbolt's field, through the gathering dusk, they saw one Harbolt standing guard in the melon-patch, and another Harbolt walking from the melon-patch up toward the house.

"So that's how it is!" exclaimed Thad, in amazement.

"So *that's* how it is!" echoed Charley Dick in equal amazement. "Just some of Harbolt's old clothes stuffed with straw that we got skeered at! It was just an old skeerecrow!"

"Scareboy would be a better name for it. Looks just like 'im, though. Crooked stick for a gun, I'll bet."

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## RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

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“Only think of all the times we crawled back to the fence on our hands and knees, just to keep that skeerecrow from shootin’ us with a crooked stick!” groaned Charley Dick, unutterable self-disgust in his tones.

“And just think of all the nice, ripe watermelon we could have stuffed ourselves with! But, like two scared gumps, we crawled off on our poor, bur-stuck hands and knees and never once took a bite!”

“But we’ll make up for it! Now that we have found out, we’ll show Harbolt what’s what!”

“Won’t we, though!”

“We’ll come right down here this very night!”

“That’s just what we will, Charley Dick.”

“And we’ll eat melon till we’re fit to pop!”

“As long as we can choke down a bite!” declared Thad. “We’ll hunt out the finest, fattest fellows, too, and we won’t eat anything but their hearts. And besides eating all we can stuff down, we’ll carry out about half a dozen big ones and hide ’em in the brush, so we can help ourselves, thank you, whenever we feel hungry for melon.”

He laughed gleefully in anticipation, and Charley Dick laughed with him. Now they hurried on up to the fort to get their suppers.

So impatient were they, and so hungry for melon, that they did not eat much, and could scarcely wait for the time to start. An hour later found them on their way down the creek, and soon they were climbing over Harbolt’s fence. Boldly enough they marched up the cotton-rows now, careless of any noise that would not reach the house.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“There stands the old skeerecrow that skeered us out of here so many times,” remarked Charley Dick, as they approached the cleverly prepared figure, which they had mistaken for Harbolt.

“Still got its old, crooked stick for a gun,” mentioned Thad. “But we’re not scared any more.”

“Looks for all the world like the old skinflint himself, don’t it? Must be his twin brother,” said Charley Dick, as they began to feel around among the vines with their bare feet for melons.

“Ten times better-looking than he is!” Thad declared.

Soon Charley Dick said: “Just watch me knock that old hat off!” He jerked a green boll from a cotton-stalk and aimed it at the scarecrow’s head. He missed the hat, but struck the figure on the shoulder.

“And to think we let that ugly old booger frighten us away from these melons so many times!” exclaimed Thad, disgustedly.

“I’ll tell you, Thad. Let’s stick fire to the old concern! I mean after we pack our melons out of here.”

But Thad was reluctant. “I don’t just—just like to burn anything,” he protested.

“Shucks! Who cares for some old duds stuffed with straw? If you’re afeard to fire ’im, I’m not. I’ve got a flint in my pocket. If we can find a boll of cotton open, we can strike fire with your pocket-knife.”

“Doubt if there’s any cotton open yet, Charley Dick. We couldn’t set fire to the thing if we wanted to. And I’d rather not burn anything of Harbolt’s. He’s never done us any harm, and—”

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## RAIDING HARBOLT'S MELON-PATCH

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“He hain’t, eh?” Charley Dick fairly snorted. “Hain’t he imposed on us? Hain’t he fooled us time and ag’in, and made us a laughin’-stock for the whole fort—if they knowed about it? Of course he has! Just think of all the times we crawled back from here on our pore hands and knees, holler as two gourds, and half skeered out of our senses! And just think of the danger we run of gittin’ snake-bit, crawlin’ so much in the dark! It was mean of Harbolt—downright mean! It’s a low-down trick to fool folks like he fooled us!” Charley Dick’s voice quivered with righteous indignation as he recounted their wrongs.

Thad was not convinced. “Guess we fooled ourselves,” he said. “I’ll tell you, Charley Dick. Let’s carry that old fellow down to the creek and pitch ’im head first into the big swimming-hole! Then Harbolt will have to strip off and swim in and drag ’im out if he wants ’im. It’ll be a good joke on the stingy old rascal.”

The suggestion struck Charley Dick favorably. “That it will, Thad—a bully good joke! And won’t Harbolt rip and snort when he finds his twin brother has been drowned?”

“I’d say he will. And it’s better to drown this old chap than to burn ’im. If we stuck fire to ’im, some of Harbolt’s folks would see the light, and here he’d come tearing with that old shotgun of his.”

“Guess that’s what he would. All right! Into the creek old Mr. Skeerecrow goes! If Harbolt ever sticks ’im up ag’in, then we’ll set fire to ’im. But let’s find our melons before we do anything else.”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Now for several minutes the two were very busy, feeling around with both feet and hands, and thumping melons vigorously. At length they had located three big, ripe ones apiece. These they brought and laid together, a few yards from the scarecrow.

"Now let's cut into one, Thad. I'm just about starved to death for melon. Don't seem like I can wait a minute longer."

"No, we'd better hold off till we carry our melons out. Then we can eat in peace, as long as we want to. If we stopped to eat in the patch, Harbolt might come sneaking down here and surprise us."

"All right, then. I'll try to tough it out a little while longer. But, first thing, let's pack that beauty down to the creek and give 'im a duckin'. That'll be fine fun! Then we'll come back for our melons. How's he fastened, do you reckon, Thad?"

"Just two sharp sticks stuck in the ground, I'd guess. But Harbolt may have stuck 'em in pretty deep. We're the boys that can pull 'em up, though."

Now they approached the big, ungainly figure which, in the dim light, looked much like a sure-enough man. But as they stooped to grasp the scarecrow's legs, the scarecrow suddenly leaned forward over them, as if about to fall.

"You'll pitch me in the creek, will you? You'll stick fire to me, eh? I'm a skinflint, am I?" roared the scarecrow, in tones husky with anger.

But it was Harbolt's voice. And it was Harbolt's big hands, too, that had already clutched the boys fast, one hand gripping Thad and the other Charley Dick!



## XXIII

### THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

HOW the two cleverly trapped young melon-thieves kept from shrieking aloud in their terror, as they felt those great hands close upon them, is more than they could ever tell. As soon as they had recovered from the paralysis of fright, both began to struggle as if for life. But it was all to no purpose. They were utterly helpless in the angry farmer's clutches.

Drawing Charley Dick up close, Harbolt placed him between his big knees, which held the boy like a vise. Then he turned Thad over one knee and proceeded to administer the kind of punishment commonly administered to young children. When through with Thad, he reversed their positions and gave Charley Dick fully as much.

It was frightful. Thad afterwards declared that he saw stars every time that big right hand struck; and Charley Dick admitted that if he hadn't been too big to cry he would have bellowed like a calf. The sounds could be heard plainly all over the farm.

When the awful ordeal was over, Harbolt, grasping

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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each by an arm, started off toward the creek with them.

What he was about to do they did not know. Fearing something dreadful, they kicked and struggled and tried hard to escape. But they were as helpless in the big man's hands as two mice under the paws of a cat. Harbolt first shook them—almost shook the breath out of them—then dragged them along resistlessly.

Soon he had them at the big swimming-hole. Here there was no fence, the high, upright bank on this side making rails unnecessary.

“You wanted somethin’ pitched into the creek, and now you shall have your fill of it!” the settler announced. And catching them up, one at a time, he hurled them far out toward the middle of the deep pool. They sank out of sight.

Both were good swimmers. Bobbing up, they shook the water from their eyes, then made frantically for the far bank. Reaching it, they climbed out among the willows, relieved beyond words to be free once more.

“Now clear out of there, you young varmints!” roared the long-tryed, exasperated farmer. “And if I ever ketch you inside of my field-fence ag’in, I’ll whale you both to a frazzle!”

The two culprits fled, streaming water as they ran. Nor did they pause till several hundred yards away. Even then they stood for some time in a listening attitude, half suspecting that their enemy might be in pursuit.

“He sp-spanked us, didn’t he?” shivered Charley Dick. Somehow their dripping clothes felt very cold in the night air.

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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"Yes, he did, the stingy old rip!"

"He wasn't so—so very stingy with his sp-spankin'."

"No, that he wasn't. Wish we could do something to him to get even."

"So do I, Thad. I wish we could up and chuck him in the creek, like he did us."

"Time wasted to wish that. He's too big."

"But we've just got to do sump'n, Thad. If nothin' else, I'll go back and pull up his old melon-vines by the roots. I've been spanked, and I'm bound to have satisfaction."

"Yes, go back, and Harbolt will give you ten times as much. For my part, I've got all the satisfaction I want. I'm ready to quit if he is. He's too sharp for us."

"But how can we go home, Thad? We're both as wet as drowned rats; and we've lost our hats."

"That's so. Guess I left mine in the creek."

"So did I mine. Reckon we'd dare go back and fish 'em out?"

"Don't know. Harbolt may be hanging around there, watching for us."

"He's more apt to be up in the melon-patch."

"No telling where that big booger is, Charley Dick. But he's dead certain to be where he's not wanted."

"We cain't go home without our hats."

"No, of course not. Let's go back and risk it."

So back they stole to the swimming-hole. After assuring themselves that their enemy was nowhere close by, Thad swam in, found their hats, and swam out with them. Then they trudged off toward the fort.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“I ain’t so overly hungry for melon now.”

“Charley Dick, just the sight of a watermelon would make me sick at my stomach.”

Farther on they speculated as to whether it was worth while to try to keep their humiliating experience a secret. Doubtless Harbolt would take pleasure in shouting it from the housetops. But they decided to tell nothing until he told.

Thad spent the night with Charley Dick. Together they climbed to the loom-house loft. There they hung their wet clothes and hats up to dry while they slept.

Day was breaking when Thad awoke. Finding his clothes dry, he slipped them on and went home without waking Charley Dick. From the house, after rekindling the cooking-fire in the yard, he passed on to the cow-pen.

When he came back, with a big tin bucket full of milk, his mother was out under the shed, cooking breakfast. As he set the bucket on the table, she exclaimed:

“Why, Thaddy, what in the world is the matter with your clothes?”

Thad tried to inspect the clothes for himself. “Ma, I can’t see anything wrong with ’em.”

“You can’t! Then there’s something bad the matter with your eyesight! They’re all wrinkled up. A blind man could see they’ve been wet.”

Thad weighed his reply. “Yes, they have, ma. But they’re dry now. So it don’t amount to much.” He started off.

“But how did you come to get ’em wet?”

“Why, ma, I fell into the creek. Charley Dick and I both tumbled in where the water was deep.”

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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"Tumbled into the creek! How in the round world did you happen to do such a gawky thing?"

"Ma, I can't just explain how it was. But we were right on the creek-bank, both of us; and first thing we knew in we tumbled, kersplash!"

That statement was true enough as far as it went. But it omitted several important details.

"Well, you two must be regular blunderbusses!" exclaimed Mrs. Dayberry. "If you're as gawky and addle-brained as that, you'd better keep away from the creek-bank."

"Yes'm, we will."

Fearful of further questioning, Thad took the water-bucket from its shelf, emptied the water into the tea-kettle, and started to the spring. As he was passing the Wilkins house, Marzee came to the door.

"Oh, Thad," she cried out, "what's the matter with your clothes?"

The boy's face reddened. He had hoped to get by without being seen by Marzee. But he made a pretense of looking over such parts of his clothes as were visible to him, then said:

"They look all right to me."

"Look all right! Why, Thad Dayberry, they look just exactly like you'd tumbled into the creek with 'em and got wringing wet! And your hat does too."

"Well, that's just what I did do," he had to admit. And his face turned a deeper red.

"But how did you happen to fall in?" persisted the girl, still critically eyeing his wrinkled cotton pantaloons and shirt.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Well, Charley Dick Sheegog and I were just having a little fun—I mean trying to have a little fun,” he corrected. “We came to the creek-bank, and first thing we knew in we fell. The water was deep there, too; and when we got out two dish-rags couldn’t have been wetter.”

“Huh! I can’t see where the fun would come in, tumbling into the creek with your clothes on.”

“Well, it wasn’t so overly funny, Marzee. Anyhow, I’ve seen funnier things,” the boy admitted, soberly.

But, though he had kept the painful truth concealed, and that without telling any lies, he was glad to escape from the girl and her frank dark-blue eyes. He returned by way of the cow-pen, and entered his home at the back door.

About the middle of the forenoon a trampling was heard, and more than thirty men rode into the fort. Perhaps a dozen of them were scouts, returning home after two weeks of patrolling the frontier. The others were the State troops. Their chief, Captain Totty, was with them. They, too, had been out scouting for several weeks, and had come back to the fort for a glimpse of a woman’s face and a taste of a woman’s cooking. Most of those were young, unmarried men, whose homes were elsewhere, some in the neighboring country, and others in other parts of the State. A dozen or more girls just entering womanhood, some of them very pretty, made these young fellows eager to get back to headquarters whenever they could.

Among the scouts who had returned were Thad’s and Charley Dick’s fathers and Mr. Wilkins.

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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Thad's father did little during the rest of the day, but sat under the brush-shed in front of his door and talked. Various persons stopped to chat with him; and two of the State troops, John Philpott and Turner Evans, took dinner with the family. Their conversation was mostly of their scouting experiences. And to those experiences Thad was always an eager listener.

The following day passed similarly; but on the morning after that Mr. Dayberry and Thad yoked the oxen and drove up to the farm. They spent the whole day there, moving out some fence to take in a few acres of new ground. Next morning they drove up again, and finished their task. But it was after dark when they got back to the fort.

The following morning Mr. Dayberry saddled and mounted his horse and, in company with more than a dozen other men, rode away toward the east. They were making a trip to Gainesville, twenty miles distant, and would not return till late at night, or perhaps not till the next day.

After his father had gone, Thad noticed Marzee out under the Wilkins shed. Two girls of about her own age had spent the night with her and were still there, helping her to wash the breakfast dishes and to strain the milk. One of the girls was Tilda Totty, Captain Totty's daughter; the other was Martha Graham.

For some reason Thad did not venture near the three girls. But after watching them a few minutes, and listening to their lively chatter, he crossed the square to Charley Dick's house. He had not spoken to Charley Dick for two days. Both the boy and his father were

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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busy, putting their team to their wagon. They were going out to their farm to do some work, and to bring back a supply of roasting-ears and vegetables.

“Have you heard anything?” Thad found an opportunity to whisper to his friend.

“Narry thing. Maybe Harbolt has made up his mind to keep his mouth shet about it, after all.”

Thad shook his head decidedly. “No such good luck. It’ll come out.”

“But we’ll never tell till he does.”

“Never!”

After the Sheegogs had driven away, Thad started across to the north side, to see Harrison Hendricks. But before going many yards he heard Buck Thompson’s voice call out:

“Hey there, Thad Dayberry! How do you like *watermelon* with the melon left out?”

Buck put so much stress on the word “water” that Thad knew that humiliating experience was known, at least among the boys. And he and Charley Dick would be long hearing the last of it. But he hurled back defiantly:

“Not much better than you liked peas salted with *gunpowder*!”

“You don’t say so, Thaddy!” sneered Buck, who plainly resented the allusion. He and two of his special followers were standing at the shady end of the Thompson house. “Laughin’ ’s ketchin’, hangin’ ’s stretchin’!” he taunted.

Thad went on without making any reply. “Guess that’s about so,” he said to himself, as he recalled how

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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much fun he and Charley Dick had made of Buck and his followers after their disastrous attempt to raid Harbolt's peach-orchard. And the truth of the crude old proverb was soon to be brought home to him still more forcibly.

Alvretty Hendricks, Harrison's younger sister, came to the door. "Harrison's not here," she said, in reply to the boy's inquiry.

Thad now started to the spring. As he passed the Wilkins house, he noticed Marzee sitting out under the shed. Martha and Tilda had gone to their homes. At sight of Thad, the girl sprang up, turned her back on him, and started into the house. Thad had hoped to pass without being seen. But at this deliberate affront he called out:

"Oh, Marzee, I've got something to tell you!"

The girl turned. "Don't you dare speak to me, Thad Dayberry!" Her tones sounded resentful.

"Why, Marzee, what—what have I done? You said I could be your best friend."

"Boys that get spanked for stealing can't be friends of mine!" The girl turned her back again.

"Marzee, that's not the first time. When I was a little shaver, ma used to spank me every few days. We've all been spanked. You have too. Your ma has spanked you many and many a spanking. I just know she has."

"You shut up, Thad Dayberry! You shan't talk like that to me! It's not nice!"

Thad was surprised. "You mentioned spanking first."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“But that was your spanking—a boy’s spanking. A girl’s spanking is different. That’s something you mustn’t talk about. It’s not nice to talk about that.”

“That so? Then I won’t. First time I ever heard that, though. I always thought spanking was spanking. But everybody has been spanked, and nobody can poke fun at anybody else for that. Even the President has been spanked. George Washington was spanked time and again, I just know, and General Marion, too, I guess.”

“But not after they’d got to be big boys, and not for stealing.”

Thad blushed. “Marzee,” he pleaded, “I didn’t steal anything—not a solitary thing!”

“I know you didn’t. But it wasn’t because you never tried. It was because you hadn’t sense enough!” She disappeared into the house.

Thad, blushing like a detected criminal, hurried on toward the spring. He suspected that Buck Thompson had made haste to tell Marzee; and hot anger burned in his heart toward Buck. However, as he was soon to learn, Marzee was not the only person who knew.

Fifty yards below the mill Thad met Mattie McDaniel, a girl of seven or eight years, coming up the path with a little tin bucket of water. At sight of the boy, she crooked her finger at him derisively as she screeched:

“Koochee! koochee! Little Thaddy Dayberry got spanked! Koochee! koochee! koochee!”

Thad’s face turned scarlet, and he hurried on. Thirty or forty yards down the path he glanced back.

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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The little water-carrier was still crooking her finger at him, and still crying the irritating "Koochee! koochee!"

"But wouldn't I like to spank you!" he muttered, resentfully, as he quickened his pace toward the creek. "Everybody in the fort knows about it, or will know by night. That wouldn't matter so much, though, if Marzee would only be sensible."

Half an hour or more he spent at the spring, reflecting on the peculiar ways of the world. Then, thoroughly miserable, he returned to the square. Marzee was now sitting under the north end of their brush-shed, churning. At sight of Thad she churned harder and stared frigidly at the wall. The boy hesitated, then stopped.

"Marzee, won't you please be friends with me again?"

The only answer was still harder churning and more frigid staring at the wall.

"Marzee, don't you ever expect to be friends with me any more?"

"No, I don't!"

"Why, what have I done?"

"You know well enough what you've done!" The girl was still staring at the wall.

"No, I don't, Marzee."

"Yes, you do. And what's more, everybody else knows too."

"Well, even if they do, that's no reason we shouldn't be friends."

"Yes, it is—the best kind of a reason."

"I don't see why."

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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"Well, I do if you don't. You—you storied to me, too. You told me, plainly as could be, that you fell into the creek."

"And I did fall in."

"No, you didn't—any such thing! Mr. Harbolt pitched you in, head first! That's how you got in!"

"But I did fall, after Harbolt pitched me," pleaded the boy. "Marzee, if you'd heard what a splash I made, you'd have thought I fell."

The girl turned her face farther away, but she made no reply.

"Marzee, won't you please be friends again?"

A decided shake of the head was her only answer.

"You will after a week, won't you?"

"No, I won't!"

"Won't you next month?"

Another shake of the head, but not so decided.

"How about next year?"

"Don't guess I will."

"Marzee, if you won't make friends, I'll go off and let the Comanches kill me and scalp me."

"Go ahead! They won't kill you, though, I guess. They'll just—just spank you and turn you loose."

Thad blushed, and tried a different plan: "Marzee, if you won't be friends with me any more, I'll go right straight and ask Tilda Totty to be my best friend."

"Go as fast as you please! It's precious little I care!"

"But you'll be friends after awhile, won't you?"

"No, I won't—never, Thad Dayberry! And I don't want you ever to speak to me again!"

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## THE TRANSGRESSOR'S HARD WAY

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"But you will after a long, long time, won't you?"

"Not in ten thousand years!" And the girl dropped the churn-dasher, sprang up and, giving her skirts a contemptuous flirt, rushed into the house.

Thad went home. To his relief, nobody was there. His mother had gone over to Mrs. Welborn's, visiting, and the children were playing out at the shady end of the house, in the chimney-corner. He went in and sat down. Soon Alice, his nine-year-old sister, appeared in the back door.

"Oh, Thaddy, what did Mr. Harbolt spank you for?"

"Shut up!" ordered Thad, resentfully. And Alice went away. But soon Carrie, his five-year-old sister, appeared at the front door.

"Oh, Faddy, Faddy, did 'ou get 'panked?"

Blushing guiltily, the boy sprang up, without a word, and hurried out at the back door. "Even the babies!" he muttered. "Next thing, the dogs and the cats will be laughing over it!"

He went by the cow-pen, stopping for a moment to tickle Humpy through the fence, and then on toward the spring. But, soon changing his course, he crossed the north branch and followed up the far side of that. At length he was wandering across the high prairie toward Williams Creek.

He had no weapon. But he didn't care much if some Indians did come along and carry him away captive. In fact, so desperate was he now that he was thinking of going out and joining the Comanches. When he had become chief of the whole Comanche tribe, he would return, with his warriors, capture Fort Blocker, and

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

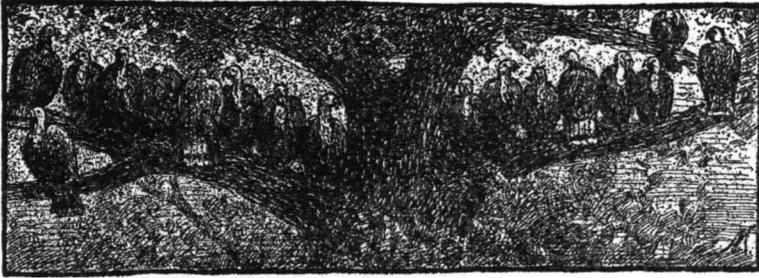
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make everybody in it a prisoner. Of course he wouldn't kill and scalp any of his prisoners, as the Comanches did—unless it was Buck Thompson. He wasn't so sure about Buck. But after the fort people were helpless and in his power, he would stand before the fickle cause of the whole trouble and say:

“False girl, see what you've made me do! This is all your work!”

So much satisfaction did Thad derive from this scene of thrilling revenge that he went over it, in his imagination, again and again.



## XXIV

### SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

WHEN dinner-time came, Thad returned to the fort. For it takes a vast amount of trouble to destroy a boy's appetite. To his relief, his mother did not mention the watermelon affair, nor did the children allude to it again.

After dinner he held the baby awhile for his mother. When relieved of that charge, he strolled slowly along in front of the Wilkins house, looking as sorrowful and woe-begone as a well-fed boy can look. Marzee was sitting in front of the door, under the brush-shed. She had cards and wool, and was busy carding rolls. Her mother was back in their smoke-house, which was also their loom-house, weaving. The boy could hear the noise of the loom.

At sight of Thad, Marzee sprang up, dropped her cards on the chair, and disappeared into the shadowy house. Nor did she come out again till Thad had passed on toward the creek.

During the next several days Thad and Charley Dick kept out of sight of the fort people as much as possible. For the story of their humiliating experience

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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in Harbolt's melon-patch was now in everybody's mouth. Helping one's self to a few watermelons was not stealing in the eyes of most of these people. In fact, they counted it a far greater crime to be stingy with one's melons, as Harbolt was. But getting caught and spanked and flung into the creek, clothes and all, was a wonderfully good joke.

Boys and men alike made the most of it. The girls, both big and little, joined in; and even the women, staid mothers of families, couldn't help alluding to the matter when occasion offered. In fact, the mere appearance of Thad or Charley Dick on the square was enough to start people to grinning.

Thad's father mentioned the matter but once, and then without any severe reproof. His mother questioned him, but spared him the rehearsal of most of the harrowing details. Perhaps she had heard them from others. She dismissed the subject by saying:

"Now, Thaddy, let that be a lesson to you to leave other folks' things alone."

"Yes'm," he answered, very glad to escape so lightly. He only wished other people would be as considerate.

But jokers are never considerate—were never known to be considerate. The two boys returned defiant answers when the other boys teased them—or the girls; and they grinned sheepishly when the men and women took a hand in the teasing. That was bad enough, in all reason. But to Thad that was not the worst.

Marzee persisted in regarding the melon-stealing affair as a serious offense, and nothing could turn her

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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from her obstinacy. She often refused to speak to Thad, even when he spoke to her. And all his efforts to appease her proved unavailing.

He had learned positively, from Martha Graham, that Buck had been the first to tell Marzee of the happenings in Harbolt's melon-patch. Of itself that was of little consequence. She would soon have learned the same facts from other sources. But Thad, though he knew of it, had not mentioned Buck's similar experience to Marzee; and now he resented what Buck had done.

He fully expected that the girl would soon get on friendly terms with Buck again. But that pain was spared him. Marzee was a sensible girl, with a conscience; and she could see the inconsistency of refusing friendship to Thad for his offense, and then being friendly with another boy who had been guilty of something just as bad.

One day Charley Dick, going to the spring for water, found Thad sitting on the gravel near the spring, with his feet in the little stream that flowed from the spring. His legs were drawn up, and his chin was on one knee.

"What you lookin' so down in the mouth about, Thad?"

Thad heaved a melancholy sigh. "Charley Dick, don't you recollect when Parson Witt preached down at the schoolhouse one Sunday last spring, with the verse for a text: 'The way of the transgressor is hard'?"

"I recollect Parson Witt preachin'. But I don't recollect any text. What's a transgressor, anyhow?"

"A transgressor— Charley Dick Sheegog, don't you know what a transgressor is?"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Charley Dick looked wise and considered. "Sounds a right smart like—like grasshopper to me. Is it some kind of a bug?"

"No, it's not some kind of a bug!" Exasperation was in Thad's tones.

Charley Dick looked wise and considered again. But nothing came of it. "Then what is it?"

"A transgressor is—is a—a fellow that knows what's right and does what's wrong—what's wicked. I know, for I'm a transgressor."

Charley Dick eyed his friend suspiciously. "What you been doin' that's wicked, Thad Dayberry?" he demanded.

"Stealing Harbolt's watermelons. And I'm feeling almighty mean over it."

"That all? Then don't fret. All the watermelons you stole from Harbolt, a hummin'-bird could eat 'em and still be hungry."

Thad blushed. "I mean trying to steal Harbolt's watermelons. It's all the same."

Charley Dick made a wry face. "Didn't taste the same to me—not by a long shot!"

"But it is. And I always did know that stealing is stealing."

"Who ever heard tell of takin' a few melons bein' called stealin'?"

"I know most folks don't count it that. But I wasn't fooled. I knew all the time that I didn't have any right in Harbolt's melon-patch. But the Old Scratch got in me as big as a beef-steer, and I went right in anyhow. The harder it was to get the melons, the more I set my

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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fool head to have 'em, whether or no. Yes, I'm a transgressor—the very worst kind! And Parson Witt was right. I'm finding the way mighty hard." Thad sighed again.

"Don't see as it's any harder for you than it is for me. And I'm not puttin' up any pitiful mouth. Let 'em poke fun at me if they want to, and as much as they want to! I'll give 'em as good as they send!"

"But it's not the same with you as it is with me, Charley Dick—don't you see? Marzee hadn't ever promised to be your best friend, and she had mine. And now just look at the way that girl treats me! She hates the very sight of me."

"Huh!" Charley Dick snorted his contempt for such weakness. "What's a gal, anyhow? What's one gal more than another, Thad? If Marzee won't be friends with you any more, go and shine up to Tildy Totty, or Marthy Graham, or Roxy Weese, or—or any of 'em. If one won't like you, another will."

"All right for you to talk like that, Charley Dick. Martha and Tilda are nice, and so's Roxy; and I like all of 'em. But the—the trouble with them is, they're not—not Marzee."

The other boy whistled. "But ain't I glad I'm not soft on any gal—Marzee or anybody else! If I was, though, I wouldn't let her make a fool of me. I'd p'int my finger right straight at her nose, and then I'd say: 'Marzee Wilkins, if you don't like me, do you know what you can do? You can lump me—that's what!' Ketch me quilin' down in the dirt to let any petticoat walk on top of me!"

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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But Thad was too worried to take any such independent course. He was learning how much anxiety one not very large girl is capable of causing. The more he brooded over the matter, the more he longed to be on friendly terms with Marzee again. And the harder he tried to regain her friendship, the worse she flouted him.

“Marzee, if you’ll just be friends with me once more, I’ll never steal anything else till the longest day I live. I won’t anyhow. The very word ‘steal’ nearly makes me sick now. I’m done with that kind of thing for good and all—for ever and ever and ever!”

So he assured her one morning at the cow-pen, while they were out there milking. But the girl only laughed scornfully as she answered:

“Go and be friends with Tilda Totty if you want to be friends with anybody. She won’t care how many melons you steal—maybe.”

Thad protested that he had no special interest in Tilda. And he was heartily sorry he had ever been foolish enough to mention Tilda’s name. But Marzee was as obstinate as ever. In fact, it was seldom that she spoke to him at all, even in a scornful way.

One morning, moved by a brilliant inspiration, Thad shouldered his rifle, strolled down through the woods below the fort, and shot a crow that was cawing loudly on a limb. One shiny-black wing he cut off with his pocket-knife and carried home. There he spread the wing in the sun and weighted it with his nother’s smoothing-irons. When thoroughly dry, the wing remained spread. Now Thad tried it and found it a pretty good fan. Most of the fans used by the women

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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and girls here were wild turkeys' wings or tails. But this, while not so large as a turkey-wing, was so much prettier that Thad felt sure Marzee would relent the moment she caught sight of it.

So he called Florence, her little sister, over and asked her to take the crow's wing and give it to Marzee. Florence herself was delighted with this new style of fan, and Thad awaited the result hopefully as well as anxiously.

But if he expected Marzee to come hurrying out, with tears of gratitude in her eyes, to thank him for his beautiful gift, and to assure him that Harbolt's watermelons were both forgiven and forgotten, he was woefully disappointed. Marzee did not so much as glance out.

When Florence appeared again, Thad beckoned her over. "What did she say?" he questioned, eagerly.

"She said, 'What did he send me that ugly thing for?'"

Thad's eager, hopeful smile died instantly. "Is that all?"

"No. She said—she soon said: 'Oh, yes, I know now. Crows steal watermelons. He sent me this to— to put me in mind of himself.'"

Thad blushed painfully.

"But I think it's pretty. Won't you make me a fan like that, Thad?"

"Yes, I will, Florence," he promised, grateful for her appreciation of his work. And he afterwards kept his promise. But he wasted no more presents on her sister.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Usually, if Marzee so much as caught sight of Thad, she would turn her back. If he spoke to her, she would look some other way and keep silent. Finally, to cap the climax, she turned one day, when he was too persistent, and made a face at him—made a face in sight of three or four boys and girls.

That was too much for Thad. Though by no means timid, he was very sensitive to some things; and that last affront was more than he could stand. Hurt and humiliated, he slunk away. Nor did he willingly go near the girl again. Indeed, after that he shunned her as much as he had sought to be near her before.

The joking and teasing, which had already become the pest of Thad's and Charley Dick's lives, went mercilessly on. Sunday was perhaps the worst day. There was no Sunday school in the fort, and often no preaching; and the boys and girls, especially, had little to do most of the day to amuse themselves. And how could they amuse themselves better than by teasing Thad and Charley Dick for that unlucky spanking experience? The tormented pair would have been glad to escape from the fort every Sunday if they could.

One Saturday afternoon Charley Dick came hurrying to Mr. Dayberry's door.

"Thad, Uncle Dan Bedford's here. He's come to mill in his wagon, and I'm goin' home with 'im, to stay till to-morr' evenin' or Monday mornin'. Don't you want to go too?"

Thad's face brightened. "I'll go if pa'll let me, and jump at the chance."

"Uncle Dan says if you'll come, us three will go

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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turkey-huntin' to-night. He knows where there's a roost, Uncle Dan does—an old turkey-hin and a gang of nearly grown young ones. Let's ask your pap."

"How do you expect to go?" inquired Thad's father, when they had told him what they wanted.

"Ride in Uncle Dan's wagon goin', and walk comin' back," answered Charley Dick. "We won't bother to take horses, I guess."

"All right. He can go if he wants to."

Soon the two boys were ready to start. Thad was armed with his father's shotgun, that being better for hunting turkeys, and Charley Dick with his father's rifle.

Mr. Bedford and his wagon were at the mill, and the boys hurried down there. Soon the sacks of meal had been loaded, and the three, all sitting on a board across the wagon-bed, were driving away up the valley.

"How's Mack getting along with your sheep, Mr. Bedford?" Thad soon inquired.

The man grunted contemptuously. "Mack Potter ain't worth his salt at sheep-herdin' or anything else. He's worse than nobody at all with sheep. Such a big sleepyhead, he let the wolves break into the pen two differ'nt nights and eat all the sheep they wanted. Then I got another herder, and tried Mack a month at farm-work. But he wasn't much better at that. Finally I told 'im to move on."

"What made Mack so careless with the sheep, do you think, Mr. Bedford?"

"I don't know, Thad. Guess he just laid there on his pallet and snored away, too lazy or too don't-care-

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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a-picayune to hustle out and see what ailed the pore brutes.”

“Maybe he was skeered of the wolf,” suggested Charley Dick.

“No, he wasn’t—not Mack,” Thad spoke up. “Fellow that would go out with the sheep and leave his gun at the house wasn’t afraid.”

“Guess he left his gun because he was too tarnal lazy to pack it around,” the man said. “Fellow that would lay and sleep—”

“My guess is, he wasn’t asleep. He was gone,” remarked Thad, nudging Charley Dick, to remind him of the boot-tracks seen among the moccasin-tracks.

The two boys were still keeping their secret. If Thad had been questioned, perhaps he would have explained what he really meant. But Mr. Bedford only answered:

“Wouldn’t be surprised if that’s right. The no-count rascal may have been off gaddin’ around some’r’s.”

“Did he leave the country—Mack?” asked Thad.

“No. He’s livin’ away over yander in the thick woods with that feller Bill Walters. The pair stay there by theirselves, in that little pig-pen of a cabin, keepin’ bach.”

“Bill Walters hain’t got such a very good name, has he, Uncle Dan?”

“Nothin’ to brag on. And now that the two have drifted together, folks kind of s’picion ’em both. Good deal of talk about ’em.”

“What do people say?”

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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“Well, Thad, for one thing, they say Mack and Walters are sometimes away from home two or three days at a stretch. And when they do come back to their shanty, their horses show signs of bein’ hard rode. Of course, that may mean somethin’, or it may not. The two fellers may just have been off huntin’, or visitin’ their kinfolks. Move along here, cattle!” the man cried out, cracking his whip over the oxen. “We want to be at that turkey-roost by dark, or a little before.”

The conversation now shifted to wild turkeys, and the best ways of hunting them. Mack Potter and Bill Walters, as well as their suspicious conduct, were forgotten.

The party arrived at Mr. Bedford’s place a little before sundown, and unyoked the oxen at the stockade gate. Supper was ready when they went in. And it was dusk when, after scolding the dogs back, the three set out, their guns on their shoulders, for the turkey-roost. The distance was about a mile and a half.

Not long after starting they began to hear a bell. “My horse-bell,” the man remarked, while they were still a good distance from it.

“Can you tell a bell you know as fur as you can hear it, Uncle Dan?”

“Not quite, Charley Dick. That is, most of ’em. But I can tell my horse-bell almost as fur as I can hear that. It sounds differ’nt to other bells. There’s a sort of funny farewell to the tone, you notice.”

“Yes, I’ve been noticing that,” answered Thad.

“Speakin’ of bells reminds me of somethin’, boys. About the best way to hunt wild turkeys on the roost is

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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to put a bell on your neck and then crawl to the tree on your all-fours. They've found out somehow, turkeys have, that animals that wear bells don't eat turkeys."

"Did you ever hunt with a bell, Uncle Dan?"

"Well, I should say I have—many's the time. If I'd thought of it, we'd have fetched a bell with us to-night. I've hunted with that very bell my bell-mare has got on now."

Soon Thad said: "I've never tried hunting with a bell, but I've always wanted to. Is your bell-mare gentle?"

"Gentle as a dog. And we can just as well borry that bell as not. That's what we'll do, too. Horses keep together better with a bell; but they'll git along all right without one for a day or two."

Changing their course slightly, the three approached the ringing. As they drew near, loud, suspicious snorts greeted them from the little drove of scarcely visible horses grazing among the open woods. But when the owner spoke to the animals, they ceased snorting, and three or four, the bell-mare among them, came straight to him.

"Bet, I'll put this on ag'in next time you come home for salt," he remarked, while unbuckling the bell-collar. Then, after rebuckling it, he hung the bell on his arm, and the three hunters tramped on. The bell kept up a steady ringing as they walked.

Soon the party came to a cattle-path and followed that, the man in the lead, Thad at his heels, and Charley Dick at Thad's heels.

At length Mr. Bedford stopped by a big dead tree.

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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“Roost just a little piece ahead now,” he whispered. “From here we’ll go on our hands and knees. This path we’re in leads almost under the roost-tree; so we won’t have any trouble findin’ it. Guess the turkeys are used to havin’ animals pass under ’em. Better leave our hats right here at this dead tree. A turkey can’t see much after dark; but they might notice our hats, and then they’d s’picion us of humbuggin’ ’em.”

After giving his young companions careful instructions, especially as to how to carry their guns, the man slipped the bell-collar over his head, then dropped to his hands and knees. The boys did the same. Now the three began to crawl along the well-beaten path, pushing their guns before them. The bell on Mr. Bedford’s neck rang as regularly and naturally as if on some moving animal’s neck.

The woods were very scattering here. At length the man stopped, turning partly.

“That big black-jack just ahead is the roost,” he whispered. Then he added: “Seems funny for a feller to be down on his all-fours, tryin’ to pass hisself off for a sheep or a cow. But this is the way to fool ’em.”

He crawled on, the bell still ringing, and the others followed. Soon they were almost under the black-jack, gazing upward.

Gradually objects took shape against the background of the sky, till Thad could make out two rows of roosting turkeys, one row on one limb and the other row on another limb. He even counted them, and found eight on one limb and nine on the other.

The wild fowls kept craning their long necks and

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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stretching their heads down in an effort to learn what was below. They seemed only curious, not alarmed; for they sometimes uttered faint little piping sounds of peace. Mr. Bedford kept the bell ringing more or less regularly, while the hunters put their heads together till he could whisper his instructions. When the boys understood where to aim and at what signal to fire, the three cocked their guns noiselessly, and raised them at the same time.

Thad took careful aim, and was waiting for the signal to press the trigger, when Bedford lowered his gun, and whispered for the boys to do the same. The noise of hoofs, coming from not far away, had reached their ears.

For two or three minutes they listened, till the hoof-beats ceased. Then, to quiet the turkeys, Bedford rang the bell steadily for a little while. Now the hunters listened again.

The hoof-beats were louder by this time, and coming rapidly nearer. It was a still night, and all sounds were very distinct.

“Are they loose horses, do you think, Uncle Dan?” whispered Charley Dick.

“No, they’ve got riders. You can tell from the way they step.”

“They’re making straight this way. Hadn’t we better shoot before they come close enough to frighten the turkeys?” Thad whispered.

“No. Let’s keep still till we find out who they air. Must be a good-sized gang of ’em.”

The three listened again. Soon the horsemen

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## SEVENTEEN TURKEYS ON A BLACK-JACK

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seemed scarcely two hundred yards away. But there they halted.

“What’s the matter with that bell-mare now, that she’s keepin’ so still?” a man’s irritated voice inquired, with an oath.

Hastily Thad nudged Charley Dick. “Mack Potter!” he whispered.

“Just who it is,” answered Bedford, who had overheard.

“Reckon she could have quit grazin’ and laid down?” asked another voice, which was strange to Thad.

“That’s Bill Walters,” whispered Bedford. “Now, what can that precious pair be out fur? Nothin’ good, I’ll bet!” His hand was already clutching the bell-clapper.

Potter’s voice replied: “She might have.” Soon the same voice went on: “That was Bedford’s horse-bell—no doubt about that. I’d know old Bet’s bell among a caviyard of bells. Heard it too many times while I was workin’ for Bedford. Got about the best bunch of horses in this country, Bedford has—nearly thirty head. He watches ’em close, too. Al’ays runs ’em into that stockade pen of his’n when there’s a raid on. But we’re too sharp for ’im this raid. Won’t he be mad as a wet hen when he finds we hain’t left ’im a hoof to his name?” The speaker laughed.



## XXV

### HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

**S**TILL gripping the bell-clapper, Mr. Bedford slipped the collar over his head and carefully laid the bell away from him.

Presently Mack Potter's voice was heard again. But this time not a word that the fellow spoke could be understood.

"Very same kind of talk I heard him talk in his sleep," Thad whispered to Charley Dick.

"What—what does that mean?" Bedford almost gasped.

Thad understood well enough what it meant. But before he could explain, other voices were heard replying in what sounded like the same unknown tongue. Then Mack said, now in English, and evidently speaking to Walters:

"That old bell-mare must have quiled down and stretched out for a nap. Horses do that sometimes, when they happen onto a good soft, grassy place. We ought to find that bunch without the bell, now we're so close to 'em. They can't be a great ways off. Let's ride on a little piece further."

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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Soon the horsemen were in sight. They were passing, about fifty yards away, through an open place in the woods, their figures dimly outlined against the darker background of the forest beyond. And the three turkey-hunters fairly gasped at what they now saw.

At the head of the line—the men were riding in Indian file—rode a hatted figure, evidently Mack Potter. Close behind him came another hatted figure, Bill Walters. But the next horseman was hatless, and so were the seven others that followed him silently, one behind another. And there was no mistaking those hatless figures, with their shields and long-handled lances, even in the dim starlight. They were Indian warriors!

Now Bedford clearly understood the situation, and so did the boys. Potter and Walters, as well as the Indians with him, were out in quest of horses to steal. Hearing the bell that the turkey-hunters were using, Potter had recognized its tones. Supposing that the bell was still on old Bet, he was coming with his followers, expecting to find both the bell-mare and all the rest of Bedford's horses, ready to be driven off.

Bedford was both amused at the situation and well pleased with his own good fortune. It was a lucky chance that had led him to take off old Bet's bell to-night and wear it himself. Otherwise he would never have seen one of his horses again. And in money the little drove would have brought more than all his other possessions combined.

But the man set his teeth hard together. He felt all of a frontiersman's hatred of a horse-thief and of a redskin, and so did the two boys with him. And their

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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feelings toward white men who would assist the Indians to steal the settlers' horses were more bitter still.

The would-be thieves soon halted again. Now they sat on their horses, doubtless listening for the bell, or some other sound that would guide them to the drove.

Bedford was undecided what to do. For twelve years he had lived here, fighting Indians almost constantly. If his two companions had been men, he would have thought seriously of ringing the bell again, and then emptying their guns at the horse-thieves as they approached. But there was more than a possibility that Thad and Charley Dick would lose their heads in a fight. And, whether they would or not, he was unwilling to lead mere boys into so much danger.

The turkey-hunters were still in the path. But now, after a few whispered words, they crawled off a few yards into the tall grass and among some bushes. Then they raised their heads high enough to look over the grass, and waited anxiously to see what would happen.

Presently Mack Potter's impatient voice burst out: "I'd like to know what's happened to that old mare! That bunch must be right clost here som'r's. But looks like we ought to—"

At this moment the roosting turkeys became alarmed at the voice and all suddenly took to flight, flapping heavily, noisily as they rushed through the air, like so many winged shadows, and scattering in every direction!

Even the excited hunters in the grass had forgotten those seventeen turkeys on the black-jack limbs, and all were startled as the big fowls went flapping over their heads. But among the mounted party there was almost

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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a stampede. Several of the half-wild horses reared and plunged, and they all tried to run. When their riders had quieted them, the party advanced straight toward the turkey-roost. Mack Potter was cursing the turkeys loudly.

Bedford touched his two companions, as a warning that they should lie low. And they all flattened themselves down in the grass. Frontier boy though he was, and accustomed to dangers from his cradle, Thad could hear his heart hammering his ribs. For the horsemen were now coming along the path, and would pass but a few yards from where the three hunters lay.

Some of the horses either saw or smelt the party in the grass, for they snorted loudly. But they had been snorting before, and their riders seemed not to notice what was the matter.

The whole mounted gang, white men in the lead and Indians following, would doubtless have ridden by without suspecting anything. But something happened—something wholly unforeseen.

Bedford had left the bell lying in the path. Potter's horse, while stepping over it, happened to strike it with his hoof. It rattled noisily, loudly. Potter reined up at once, and so did those behind him, all surprised at the unexpected sounds. After sitting still a few moments, Potter hastily dismounted and kept feeling around with his foot till he found the bell. Then he held it up by the collar and made it ring.

“The very same bell we heard!” he almost shouted. “But it wasn't on old Bet! The collar's still buckled. Bedford or somebody else took it off to—”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“To hunt them there turkeys with, I’ll just bet!” burst out Walters.

“That’s right—to hunt turkeys—” Potter stopped suddenly. He had been speaking loudly, and now it seemed to occur to him that Bedford or some other turkey-hunter must be close by, listening to all that was said. The same thought quickly suggested itself to the other white man.

“Then, whoever had the bell cain’t be fur off,” Walters said, in lower tones. “Hain’t been but a few minutes since we heared the bell a-ringin’.”

The knowledge that he had betrayed himself to Bedford or some other settler seemed both to anger and to alarm Potter. He spoke a few exasperated words to his white companion in a low tone.

“Then, we’ve got to jump this country, and be mighty quick about it,” Walters answered. “But where can he be—the feller that drapped that bell?”

“Not so fur off but what he heared every word we said, you can bet!” was the reply, in cautious but exasperated tones.

The turkey-hunters were lying scarcely a dozen yards away. But it seemed not to have occurred to the horsemen that anybody could be as close as that. Potter led his horse back and talked with the Indians, in their own tongue. Afterwards he talked with Walters again, in English. Walters evidently did not understand the Indian language.

The conclusion they reached was that Bedford’s horses must be somewhere not far off, and that a little riding about through the woods would be pretty sure

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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to find them. So Potter sprang upon his horse and the whole gang galloped away.

Even before the horsemen were out of hearing, Bedford rose to his feet. The two boys did the same.

“High time for us to be hoofin’ it!” the man told his companions. “That bunch hain’t started quite in the right direction; but they’ll keep ridin’ till they run onto every nag of mine. We must git there ahead of ’em!”

The settler now took the path they had come, and Thad and Charley Dick followed him. But before they had advanced a dozen steps, something cut the air by their heads, and set a bush to shaking just beyond them. Suspecting an arrow, all turned quickly.

Not far behind they could make out several dark figures, approaching with swift but noiseless steps. In the hope of securing a white scalp or two, some of the Comanches had dismounted and were stealing back on foot.

Bedford jerked out his six-shooter. “They’re right after us, boys!” he cried. “Streak it for the bresh, both of you!”

Even as he spoke he threw up his weapon, which instantly spouted fire toward the skulking figures, and its roar seemed to rend the very forest. A moment later another flash and another roar followed the first.

Obedient to orders, Charley Dick made a dash for some brushy land ahead. But Thad, having two charges in his double-barrel gun, threw the weapon to his shoulder and fired one load at the savages. Then he turned and followed Charley Dick. And after them

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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fled the man, leaving a deafening burst of war-whoops in his wake.

Now the white party were looking out every one for himself. Fifty yards deep in a brush-patch Thad stopped and, after listening a few moments, began to reload the empty barrel of his gun. But while he was ramming down the powder, the rustling of bushes close by and light footfalls warned him that somebody was approaching. It might be Bedford, or it might be a Comanche, and the boy dropped to the ground. The footsteps came closer, and he straightened himself out, with his gun and his arms against his body.

And scarcely had he got in position when the bushes parted not a dozen feet away and an Indian warrior appeared, with his bow in his hand and an arrow in his bow. He was coming straight toward the white boy. Before the frightened lad could decide what to do, the Comanche, evidently mistaking the prostrate figure for a piece of rotten log in the dark, had stepped over Thad and was hurrying on!

The boy lay motionless, shuddering at his narrow escape. What if the savage had stepped on the supposed log instead of over it? Several minutes after the Indian disappeared, Thad crawled into a thick patch of bushes, where he finished reloading his gun.

For a good while he remained in hiding. Once he heard somebody passing through the bushes not far away. Doubtless it was the same Indian, going back. Later the trampling of numerous hooved feet close by meant that the whole party of horsemen had returned. They came to the edge of the brush-patch, as it seemed,

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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and stopped. Soon the boy heard them riding first in one direction and then in another. Finally they went galloping away.

Thad listened till the hoof-beats were dying in the distance. Fearing that some of the warriors had remained behind, he was still almost afraid to move; but at length, emerging from his hiding-place, he made his way stealthily toward the big tree where he had left his hat.

Scarcely had he reached the tree when he discovered somebody else approaching. It proved to be Bedford.

"Where do you reckon Charley Dick is?" inquired the man, after he and Thad had exchanged a few whispered words.

"I'll soon find out."

Thad whistled a signal. Not till he had repeated it several times did he hear an answering whistle. Then both boys kept signaling till Charley Dick had joined his friends. All soon found their hats; and after a brief whispered conversation they took the cattle-path and started for Bedford's home.

Once, while the three were moving cautiously along through the woods, the man paused, turned to his companions and said, scarcely above a whisper:

"Excitin'est turkey-hunt I ever had a hand in! And yet all of us together ain't packin' home a feather." He turned again and hurried on.

When the little party arrived at the place in the woods where they thought they had left Bedford's horses, the horses were not there. But, after listening a few moments, they heard one nicker. Hastening on,

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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they found the drove a few hundred yards nearer home.

Bedford caught his now bell-less bell-mare by the mane. "Boys, grab a horse apiece as quick as ever you can," he said. And he pointed out animals gentle enough to be ridden without bridle or saddle. Soon all three were mounted.

The settler now started for home, leading the way on old Bet. He could guide her with his hand. And all the other horses would follow her.

At first, because of the way they were riding, they did not attempt to move very fast. But before going far they began to hear hoof-beats, as of galloping horse-men, coming somewhere behind them. Now Bedford urged the mare to a faster gait. Soon the whole drove was going at a gallop.

Their own horses were making so much noise that the fugitives could not hear anything else. But they had no doubt that their pursuers were still not far behind. The distance was short, however, and a few minutes later the three dashed up to the stockade gate. When she had been assured as to who were there, one of Bedford's daughters swung wide the gate for them. They rode right in, and the gate was quickly closed and barred behind them. Soon all the horses were shut up in a little pen at the back side of the stockaded enclosure.

Bedford and the two boys now hurried into the house, where they prepared for a defense. By this time the pursuers, believed to be Mack Potter, Bill Walters and their savage followers, had halted only about two hundred yards away. A little later Bedford's dogs

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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began to bark furiously. From this it was inferred that some of the would-be thieves were skulking around the stockade on foot, perhaps to learn what had been done with the horses.

From the upper story of his house—it was a block-house—Bedford fired two shots at what he believed to be Indians, out in the edge of the woods. Finding that all the horses were inside the stockade, the thieves must have given up hope of getting them; for a little later they could be heard riding rapidly away.

“Now they’ve started out to round up somebody else’s nags,” Bedford remarked, as the swift hoof-beats were growing faint in the distance.

“Reckon they’ll come back, Uncle Dan?”

“Hard tellin’ as to that, Charley Dick. They may, after they think we’re off our gyard. But they’re more apt to find a bunch of horses still out on the range. They’ll steal somethin’ or bust. If I didn’t have to stand gyard here, I’d gallop down to Fort Blocker and carry Cap’n Graham word. Ought to be some scouts out after that gang, and ’specially after them two white renegades.”

Thad now told the settler of Mack’s talking in his sleep, and also of the boot-tracks, believed to be his, which the bee-hunters had noticed in the Indian camp. “Don’t you s’pose Mack has just been here spying for the redskins?” he inquired, in conclusion.

“Not a bit of doubt of that, Thad—not a bit in the world,” was the reply. “He’s a spy ag’in’ his own race—that’s what the low-down booger is! He’s been livin’ here amongst us, spyin’ out the best horses to

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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steal, and then guidin' the redskins to 'em. That's how he come to let so many of my sheep git killed. And maybe's he's been keepin' an eye out for defenseless families that could be murdered or carried off, like Mis' Tucker's. Yes, sir! He's a white spy, that's what Mack is!"

"Reckon Bill Walters is just another spy, Uncle Dan?"

"He is now, but I don't guess he has been long. He was all right, I'd say, till Mack got over there with 'im and talked 'im into devilment. Mack's the ringleader. He's the rogue that needs a rope worst. Do wisht I could git word to Cap Graham."

"Couldn't I carry word down there, Mr. Bedford?"

"Why, yes, I ruther reckon you could, Thad. But it would be risky, boy, with that gang of cutthroats scourin' the country. And that may be only part of a big gang. May be half a dozen other gangs like that not a great ways off."

"But frontier folks have to do risky things, Mr. Bedford. Seems to me I'd better go, and that as soon as I can."

"It wouldn't take you long to make the ride. Danger is that some redskin would hear you gallopin' along this still night, and waylay you."

Thad reflected a few moments. "Then maybe I'd better foot it, Mr. Bedford. That way I won't make any noise. I can hear them, but they can't hear me."

"If you go afoot, I'll go with you, Thad."

"All right, Charley Dick. Then we'll go together. That is, if Mr. Bedford says so."

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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“No, Thad, I’m not goin’ to tell you boys to go. Fact is, I don’t half like the idy of lettin’ you two start off from here just now. Of course, if you kep’ your heads, there wouldn’t be any great sight of risk, dark as the night is. But there’s some danger, and you’ll have to go on your own say-so, or not at all.”

“I’m not afraid but what we can make it,” answered Thad. “Let’s be off, Charley Dick.”

Mrs. Bedford, when she learned what the boys were about to do, was opposed to their going. But they convinced her that under the friendly cover of darkness they could take care of themselves. A few minutes later, with their powder-horns and ammunition-bags hanging at their sides, and their guns on their shoulders, they started. Mr. Bedford let them out at the stockade gate.

Silently they took the road, and silently they hurried on their way through the gloomy woods. Barefooted, they made little more noise than two cats as they walked. Thad was in the lead and Charley Dick at his heels. Both had their eyes and ears open. They spoke only in whispers.

“Here’s where that belled co’gar jumped down on top of me—or tried to,” Thad turned to whisper, after they had waded across Clear Creek and were moving along, as silently as two specters, through the thick woods.

“He’s done jumpin’—that varmint. Reckon there’s danger from any other co’gar, Thad?”

“No telling. Might be. Always some danger of ’em in the woods, you know.”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Stealthily the pair hurried on. Their ears were strained for suspicious sounds, and sometimes they paused for a few moments, to listen better. They heard numerous noises, but none that they could recognize as being made by the red raiders.

In the woods, where they could dodge off into the brush and hide at the first alarm, the boys felt comparatively safe. But when at length they emerged upon the high prairie, they became more anxious. Once they heard trampling ahead. Promptly they threw themselves down in the grass by the roadside and began to crawl away from the road. But it was only the trampling of some wild cattle. As soon as they had seen the cattle pass, the boys sprang up, adjusted their powder-horns and ammunition-bags, shouldered their guns, and hurried on their ghostlike way.

It was a good while past midnight when the two entered Fort Blocker, welcomed by the barking of numerous dogs. They went at once to Thad's home. Arousing Mr. Dayberry, they told him all they knew. The man dressed as soon as he could, and he and the boys hurried over to Captain Graham's, where they pounded on the door till it was opened. The captain was amazed at what they told him.

"So we've got a white spy among us, spying for the red men, have we?" he said. "Now, don't that beat all creation? Was he ever at the fort?"

Thad answered: "Yes, I saw 'im here once, and talked with 'im. And I'm pretty sure he was here other times, when I was up at the farm with pa. Guess I was the only person in the fort that knew 'im."

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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“I saw ’im onct, at Uncle Dan’s, but I don’t recollect much about ’im,” Charley Dick said. “I didn’t notice the feller in the fort, but I was away a good deal.”

“Now, who knows what business that rascal had here?” the captain remarked. “He might just have been spying out good, likely bunches of horses to steal; or he might have been spying to see how weak the settlers are.”

“If that was what he wanted, he’s liable to come back here almost any day, with warriors enough to wipe us off the top side of the earth—don’t you think so, Cap’n?” Mr. Dayberry inquired.

“No telling. Such a villain as that is low-down enough to do anything. But we mustn’t let ’im escape. No, sir! Not if we can help ourselves. And I think we can, if we move fast enough. Boys, I wish you’d step there to Captain Totty’s and knock on his door. We need him and all his men. We must have every able-bodied man out on that rascal’s trail.”

“And shall we wake the other men in the fort, Captain?” Thad wanted to know.

“Yes, if you will. The sooner we get started, the better.”

So Captain Totty, of the State troops, was summoned out of bed; and while he was consulting with the captain of the scouts, Thad and Charley Dick, one working in one direction and the other in another, were calling out the men and delivering the two captains’ orders. And those orders were to saddle up at once, arm and mount and be ready to ride.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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The whole fort was soon astir, and nearly everybody was dressed and out of doors. In an incredibly short time about thirty men, both scouts and State troops, were out in the square, awaiting further orders.

The whole fort was buzzing with excitement. The news that Indians were now raiding the settlements was itself sufficient to arouse these pioneers; but the fact that those Indians were actually being guided about the country by two white renegades, one of whom was undoubtedly here for spying purposes, increased the excitement tenfold. Angry mutterings could be heard among the settlers. One thing everybody agreed upon; and that was that the spy must be hunted down.

When all the men had assembled out near the center of the square, Captain Totty made a brief talk, setting forth the facts fully. In conclusion he said:

“Of course, we don’t want to let those Indians get away with any of our horses if we can help it. But I believe you will all agree with me that there’s one man in that raiding gang that must be captured, dead or alive. And that’s the white spy, Mack Potter. If he’s here to gather information for the redskins, as seems probable, he mustn’t be allowed to carry it to them. What do you say? Is that right?”

“You bet it is, Cap’n—every word of it!” promptly answered a voice. And every other man in the crowd returned a similar reply.

Captain Totty now explained the plan that he and Captain Graham had agreed upon. And that was that they should divide their force into three equal squads. Two of these, one commanded by himself and one by his

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## HUNTING DOWN THE WHITE SPY

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brother, Lieutenant Jack Totty, would at once scour the country where the raiders were known to be, so as to find them if possible, or to strike their trail at daylight. The third squad, under Captain Graham, would march west, form a union with the scouts now riding the patrol line, and try to intercept the raiders as they emerged from the Cross Timbers.

Both Thad and Charley Dick were eager to ride with one of the pursuing parties. Their fathers discouraged them, but told them to ask Captain Graham. They hurried to where that officer was standing and made their request.

“Boys, after the manly way you’ve brought us the news to-night, I feel that you ought to be allowed to ride with us, even though you’re not old enough or big enough to enlist. But the matter stands like this: The fort may be attacked at any minute, and somebody must be here to fight for the women and children. There’ll be no able-bodied men here—just a few old fellows and several boys. If I was to let you two go, I’d have to order a couple of full-grown scouts to stay here in your places; because I wouldn’t dare leave the fort any shorter-handed than it is. So it’s better for you boys to stay. You may get your fill of fighting right at your own doors—who knows?”

This explanation was satisfactory to the boys; or, at least, as nearly so as any explanation that left them behind could be.

When the division of the State troops had been made, the men mounted. Then away they all clattered, riding rapidly.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“If that white spy escapes with that big bunch of scouts on his trail, he’s a sly one,” Mrs. Welborn remarked to several women who had stopped in front of her door. Thad’s mother was among them.



## XXVI

### UNDER A BURNING CABIN

WHEN the horsemen were gone, Thad went home and to bed; and Charley Dick did the same. They felt weary enough to sleep soundly. But, in spite of that, daylight found them both awake and up. And scarcely were they out of doors when various persons came by to hear from them the story of their exciting turkey-hunt. How many times Charley Dick and Thad told that story during the day, and to how many people, would be hard to say. But they told and retold it till probably everybody in the fort had heard it from them. Indeed, for the next few days the two boys were by far the most important persons in Fort Blocker.

Besides the turkey-hunting adventure, Thad also told of hearing Mack Potter talk a strange language in his sleep. And nobody doubted now that that language was the speech of the hostile Indians, and that Mack had formerly made his home among them. Thad and Charley Dick also mentioned seeing boot-tracks among the moccasin-tracks around the deserted Indian camp-fire. And it was now generally agreed that, as the boys had suspected, Mack must have tracked the boot-tracks.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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The day, being Sunday, passed very quietly in the fort. Not one of the numerous pursuers returned; and everybody was wondering and speculating as to what news they would bring when they did return. At night there was a "singing" at Lieutenant Reel's house, and nearly all the boys and girls were there. But Thad and Charley Dick, having been up most of the night before, remained at home to sleep.

Not till late Tuesday afternoon did the pursuing party return to the fort. Their horses all showed signs of hard riding. Those who had started toward Bedford's reported having struck the raiding band's trail not long after daylight. They had ridden hard on it, not sparing their horses. They themselves had never overtaken the Indians. But the scouts who had marched straight west from the fort had encountered the raiders just beyond the Cross Timbers.

There had been a furious running fight. Two of the savages had been killed outright, and probably others wounded. All their stolen horses, about fifty head, had been recovered. But the two white renegades, who were still with the Indians, had made good their escape. Among the stolen horses brought back was the little drove of range animals belonging to Thad's father.

The escape of the two white men, and especially of Mack Potter, the spy, was bitterly regretted in the fort and throughout the whole country. And all the settlers were stirred up over the news that such a spy had been living in their midst.

Many were the surmises as to what Potter's real purpose had been in coming here. Some thought he was

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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merely looking out horses for the Comanches to steal. But others believed that his main object was to learn the strength, or, rather, the weakness, of the whites, with a view to leading a great war-party of savages down here to exterminate them.

This latter view, certainly a very alarming one, seemed to take firm hold of everybody. For days little else was talked of but the expected great raid. Wherever people met, or however they happened to meet, that was sure to be the main topic of conversation. And many and bitter were the uttered regrets that the white spy had escaped.

“What do you think, Thad? Will the redskins come down here, a big passle of 'em, and kill and skyelp us all?” asked Charley Dick one day, while the two were on their way to the spring, with water-buckets on their arms.

“Hard telling. They may come and try to. Guess they will if they think they can. But what'll we be busy at while they're killing and scalping us? My guess is, we can look out for ourselves all right. One good thing, though, in all this talk about Indians and Indian raids.”

“What's that?”

Thad grinned. “It's made everybody forget Har-bolt's watermelons.”

“That's so. I'd forgot about 'em myself. Yes, we've had peace—somethin' we wouldn't have had. Hope they won't think of 'em any more. Next year I'm goin' to ask pap to let me plant a melon-patch of my own. Stealin' watermelons is just a little too much fun—for other folks.”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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While the excitement over the white spy was at its height, and Thad and Charley Dick were, in a way, from what they knew of the matter, the center of interest in the fort, Marzee gave unmistakable signs that she wanted to be friendly with Thad again. But the boy, though he was still eager for her friendship, felt that he had been trampled upon too long and too hard to forget it all at the girl's first sign of relenting. So he kept away from her.

But Marzee, seeing that she was being avoided, became more eager than ever. Three or four times she went to the Dayberry house with something for Thad's mother. But as the girl came in at one door, Thad always slipped out at the other. Once, while the boy was passing her home, Marzee, out under the brush-shed, called softly:

"Oh, Thad, I've got something to tell you!"

The boy did not stop. He only turned, gave her a reproachful look, shook his head mournfully, and passed on.

"Thad Dayberry, you're as mean as you can be! That's what you are!" cried the girl, evidently much hurt. "I'll never speak to you again till the day I die!"

Thad stopped suddenly, in sheer astonishment. He himself had been treated the same way, or worse, so many times that he had lost count. And now that he had paid the girl back once in her own coin, she had become very indignant. Marzee had already disappeared, and Thad went on, reflecting upon what strange, capricious creatures girls could be when they tried themselves.

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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The next time he saw Marzee, feeling a little remorseful, he spoke to her. But she only turned her back, gave her skirts a contemptuous flirt, and hurried away. After that he let her alone altogether.

One day at dinner Thad's father said to him:

"Guess you'd better take a little ride over to Ike Watson's for me this evenin'. He owes me ten dollars, and I'll have to have it. He promised to bring it the first time he was down this away, but I cain't wait any longer."

"All right, sir. I'll go."

Dinner ended, Thad started off toward the spring. After taking Ped to water that morning, he had lariatied him on a patch of prairie beyond the creek. But when the boy arrived at the spot, the horse was missing. An examination showed that Ped had pulled his stake out of the ground.

A furrow through the grass, plowed by the dragging stake, indicated that the horse had gone toward the northwest. Expecting to find him a few hundred yards farther on, Thad followed.

Up the high hill the trail led, and then across the uneven prairie. Expecting every minute to catch sight of the lost animal, Thad hurried on. A half-mile, a mile, two miles, three miles he tramped, but still not a glimpse of Ped.

Now the boy paused and looked about him. He had no weapon, and was beginning to feel a little uneasy. He thought of turning back.

"No, I won't," he soon told himself. "I've followed him all this distance, and I'll have the runaway rascal

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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before I go home. He can't be so very far away now. If it wasn't for that stake-pin dragging, I'd think somebody must be riding him."

The trail through the grass was still plain, and the boy only quickened his pace and hurried on. A mile farther, and he looked down into a hollow and caught sight of the object of his search.

But Ped was not alone. He had joined a drove of fifteen or twenty range-horses and, notwithstanding his trailing lariat, seemed very much at home with them.

The horses were pretty wild, and when Thad approached they took to flight. And away Ped galloped with them, kicking up his heels gaily to show how much he was enjoying his freedom.

Thad was indignant. "You ungrateful rascal!" he exclaimed. "That's the pay I get for moving you to fresh grass three times a day, and watering you three times a day! But I'll have you yet!"

He followed on, hoping to get close enough to grasp the end of the trailing lariat. But the horses kept well ahead of him. All this time the boy had been traveling toward Watson's place. And now it occurred to him that if he caught the horse he could ride on over there bareback.

There was no hope of catching Ped on the open prairie. But the Cross Timbers began not far away, and it occurred to the boy that if he could drive the horses into the woods, he would stand a better chance to steal upon them.

They went straight on till near the woods. Then, instead of entering, they turned north and followed

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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along the edge of the prairie. Thad kept after them for half a mile farther, hoping that they would turn. But they did not; and as they were now going at a gallop, he was soon left far behind. Bitterly disappointed, he gave up the hopeless chase till he could get a horse to ride.

But he was now only about three miles from Watson's, and near the road leading there. So he tramped on in that direction, soon entering the woods.

It was past the middle of the afternoon when he arrived at Watson's house. A swarm of children were playing in the front yard. From the noise they made, he surmised that there was no grown person at home.

"Pa and ma, they've both gone over to Mr. Perryman's," Lizzie, the oldest of the children, informed Thad. She was only ten. "Pa had to go over there, and ma she clumb in the wagon with the baby and went with 'im."

"We all wanted to go, the worst kind, but they wouldn't let us," spoke up a little boy of eight years, Benny by name.

"They left us here by ourselves—all by ourselves," said a little girl.

"Well, you ought to be big enough to stay by yourselves," remarked Thad, merely by way of saying something. He himself had doubts of that.

"Yes, we're big enough—we're plenty big enough," replied another little girl, still smaller.

"How soon will they come back?" Thad inquired.

"They said they wouldn't be gone till late," Lizzie answered.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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That was rather indefinite. But Thad sat down on a bench to rest and cool. He would wait awhile, at least.

There were five children here. Mrs. Watson was a sister to Mr. Wilkins, in Fort Blocker, and the children were soon questioning Thad concerning their cousins, Florence and Marzee. After that he and they talked of various things.

"Let's roast some sweet pertaters," a little girl finally proposed.

"Have you got any potatoes?" Thad inquired.

"Yes, we've got some. They're down in the pertater-hole," the little girl told him.

"In what?"

"In the pertater-hole, under the house," Lizzie explained.

Here Benny started inside. "I'll show you!" He raised a puncheon, more than a foot wide, from the middle of the floor.

To please him, Thad went in and looked down into the miniature cellar. The potato-hole was perhaps a yard deep and four or five feet square. It was very dark. Benny dropped down into the hole and handed up some sweet potatoes. Thad took them, and with a burnt-ended clapboard leaning against the jamb—the family's substitute for a shovel—he buried them in the embers that remained from the dinner fire.

"Let's play sump'n while they're cookin'. Let's play Injuns," proposed one of the little girls to Thad.

"All right. I'm willing. But how do you play that?"

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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It was Benny that explained: "Why, we shut the door tight, and then we make out like there's redskins all around the house."

The little boy now ran out and brought in some sticks, which he distributed to the various members of the party. Then he shut the door, fastening it on the inside.

"And what are we to do with these sticks?" inquired Thad.

"They're guns," Benny explained. "We peep out through the cracks, and when we see a red man, bang we let 'im have it!"

Joining in the game, Thad went to the wall and peeped out through the undaubed chinking that filled the spaces between the logs.

"I see one—I see one!" cried a little girl. And then "bang!" went her stick-gun. "I got 'im! I got 'im! Didn't you see 'im fall?" the little defender cried out, exulting over her imaginary good-marksmanship.

Soon began the watching again, all keeping silence while they peeped through their loop-holes, wherever they could find openings between the logs.

"Sh! Somebody comin'! Shore-'nough somebody!" It was Benny who whispered this warning, a quarter of an hour later.

He was right. Soon the trampling of horses could be plainly heard. Thad went to the south wall and peeped out.

In front of the house rose a high, brush-covered hill. Winding along the foot of the hill, and between the hill and the field fence, ran a road. It was along this road

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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that the trampling was approaching. There was no noise of wheels; so it could not be Watson and his wife returning home.

Soon the riders came into view from behind a projection of the hill, and Watson's dog ran out and began to bark fiercely. At sight of them Thad's heart seemed actually to stand still in his bosom. They were Indians!

For a few moments after his heart had begun to beat again, furiously, the boy's head seemed to reel and swim with excitement. Then it cleared, and his eyes went quickly to the deer-horn gun-rack on the back wall. But the rack was empty.

The Watson children had also been quick to discover who the horsemen were.

"Injuns—shore-'nough Injuns—lots and lots of 'em!" Lizzie told the others, in a whisper so hoarse with terror as to need no confirmation. Instantly the children were frozen to silence.

"What can we do, Thad?" whispered Lizzie.

"Anything here to shoot with?"

"No. Pa took his gun and his six-shooter both."

Thad tried to think. If the war-party had not been so close, he would have attempted to get the children out and into the brush. But the door in the south side was the only opening, and the Indians were already in plain sight of that.

Soon one of the smaller girls began to whimper. Lizzie seized her and shook her fiercely. "Don't you dare—don't you dare cheep!" she almost hissed. "If you make a noise, the redskins will come in and kill us all!"

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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No more whimpering after that. Thad was still trying to think of some way to escape. The Indians might not stop, or they might not come in. But ten chances to one they would do both. And if they did—

The sweet-potato-hole! Why could not all the children hide in that? The Indians might not think to tear up the floor. At any rate, it was the only hope.

Quickly Thad raised a heavy puncheon. The little Watsons understood at once. As noiselessly as young partridges they dropped into the dark hole. Lizzie was the last to disappear.

Still holding up the end of the puncheon, Thad peeped out. The savages had already halted in front of the cabin. Soon he caught glimpses of bronzed, half-naked figures dismounting. Not daring to wait longer, the boy slipped under the puncheon and lowered himself into the hole, among the five children. Then he let the puncheon down carefully, cautiously, to its accustomed place. Now he squatted as low as he could, and waited and listened.

The Comanches seemed to be approaching the house; for by this time the dog had retreated to the door, where he stood growling and barking fiercely, defiantly. Soon he uttered one sharp yelp, and after that was silent.

Now Thad began to hear light footfalls, as of moccasined feet, in the front yard. Rising up a little, he peeped along the ground and out from under the door-sill. Several pairs of feet and legs were already inside the fence. On the ground near the door lay the dog, dead, with an arrow sticking out of his body. The dis-

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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mounted warriors were approaching cautiously. Much bloody experience with Texas settlers had taught them prudence.

Soon the boy saw feet near the door-sill, and heard somebody working at the door. The fastening, a raw-hide cord around a peg, quickly gave way, and the door swung outward. Now light footfalls overhead and movements of the loose puncheons meant that the warriors had entered the house.

Presently more of the Indians dismounted and came in. For a good while they kept moving about. What they were doing Thad could only guess. But he shuddered as he reflected that at any moment one of them might take it into his head to lift a puncheon. All the puncheons were loose.

Doubtless the warriors were searching the house in quest of things to carry away. Sometimes they talked together, and they even uttered exclamations.

At length noises were heard out in the front yard. Rising up again till he could peep from under the sill, Thad was surprised to see the yard white with loose, moving feathers. The savages had taken the two feather-beds out there and ripped them open. The sight of so many fluttering things seemed to amuse the warriors greatly. They could be heard talking and laughing; and from the movements of their feet it was evident that some of them were kicking and capering about among the feathers.

Thad was delighted. Those things would be apt to divert the Comanches' attention and keep them from lifting a puncheon.

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## UNDER A BURNING CABIN

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This went on for a good while. The sun had been rather low when the Indians came, and at length it seemed to have set. This, too, was something to be thankful for. For the Indians were now all around the house. If one should happen to peep under the floor, in the twilight the existence of the potato-hole could not be discovered.

The five little Watsons, crouching as low as they could get, kept as still as mice when cats are near. But Thad, with his eyes just above the level of the ground, was watching those moccasined feet.

It was dusk when the children began to hear other sounds overhead, and to detect a very pronounced odor.

“What is it, Thad? What are they doin’?” whispered Lizzie.

“They’ve stuck fire to the beds. They’re going to burn the house,” was the whispered reply.



## XXVII

### WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

RAPIDLY the noise of the flames overhead grew louder. Soon the whole inside of the house was roaring and crackling. Ere long the walls and the roof must begin to burn. Smoke was finding its way downward between the puncheons.

Now the Indians retreated to the fence. Later most of them remounted their horses. Thad, still peeping out from under the sill, was hopeful that the whole band would soon ride away, so that he and the children could escape from under the burning cabin.

But the Comanches did not ride away. Having started a fire, they appeared to be going to wait and witness the spectacle. Night was already settling down, and they seemed to have no fear of discovery.

Fifty yards back the way the savages had come was a stack of wheat-straw, and a corn-crib built of poles and covered with straw. Those, it could now be seen, had also been fired. Though Thad could look only along the ground, he knew from the noise and light they made that flames from them must be leaping many feet skyward.

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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Louder and still louder crackled and roared the fire overhead; and closer and thicker grew the air the children in the potato-hole had to breathe. Reaching up his hand, Thad felt the puncheons. Already they were growing hot. Soon the air had become so thick with smoke that the youngest child gave an involuntary cough. Promptly Lizzie shook the offender.

"You mustn't!" she hissed into the little one's ear. "You mustn't make a noise, no matter how much it hurts. The Injuns will murder us every one if you do!"

For a few moments Thad trembled lest the cough had been loud enough for the warriors to notice it. But by this time the flames had reached the roof, and the dry clapboards were crackling and making so much noise that no ordinary sound could be heard.

At length the air under the floor became so thick with smoke that the children kept gasping and were threatened with suffocation. Already the puncheons overhead were almost too hot to touch. Had they been pine instead of hard oak, they would doubtless have caught fire before now. Eagerly, with awful anxiety, Thad gazed out from under the front sill. By this time the warriors were all sitting on their horses. But they still showed no intention of riding on. Indeed, the brilliant scene of destruction probably delighted their savage souls.

"What can we do, Thad? We'll all soon smother here," whispered Lizzie.

"Yes, and we'll burn to death, too," whispered Benny.

Thad whispered back: "I know. I've already made

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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up my mind what to do. But it's dangerous to do it. We'll wait just as long as we can before we try that. They may ride away any minute."

But the Comanches did not ride away. At length Thad realized that to wait longer meant suffocation, or death by fire.

"Wait here. I'll come back in a minute," he whispered to the children. Then he climbed out of the potato-hole and began to crawl about in the foot or so of space between the floor and the ground.

The ground sloped downward from the front of the house toward the back; and the rear sill, which rested merely on corner-stones, was several inches higher from the ground than the front sill. The end foundation-logs were still higher; but the children would not dare crawl out at either end.

Thad had carefully noted all that before. Just now he was moving about for a better look outside. He wanted to learn for certain where all the Indians were. On crawling back to the potato-hole, he whispered to Lizzie:

"They're every one right in front of the house, and we'll wriggle out at the back side."

The strangling children were eager to escape. While they put their heads close to Thad's, he whispered his instructions. Then he helped the smaller ones out of the hole. When all were ready, Thad, well flattened against the ground from necessity, began to worm his way toward the rear sill. And after him crawled the five little Watsons, one behind another.

The first, a little girl, was clinging to Thad's bare,

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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dusty foot, and the whole chain of children was thus linked together. Lizzie, with the youngest child, a three-year-old boy, just in front of her, was bringing up the rear.

Coming to the rear sill, Thad peeped out from under it, to make sure that the Indians had not changed their position. The ground near the house and far around seemed almost as light as day. The way appeared clear. So he put his head under the sill and tried to crawl out. But he soon stuck fast.

Finding it impossible to force himself through, he drew back. But not before he had reached out and got hold of a stick that happened to be lying there. With that he gouged and dug away the ground till he could squeeze himself under. Quickly he was out in the open air.

On he crawled, without stopping, but glancing back often. One by one the little Watsons emerged from under the sill, till all five were out in the firelight's glare. Still the line wriggled itself on, snakelike, each child clinging desperately to the one ahead. Now the heat from the flaming roof almost blistered their backs, and especially the backs of their necks. But they only squirmed along the faster.

About fifty yards from the house was a little ravine, or big gully, which wound its way down through the field, its banks marked by a few bushes. It was for the gully that Thad was making. And he was very careful to keep the burning house between himself and the war-party. Should the Comanches change their position, or even start to ride away, they could scarcely fail to

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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notice that line wriggling itself along. Thad's hope and prayer was that they would not change their position, at least for a few minutes.

Thirty feet or more from the house the line wriggled itself into a patch of broom-weeds. After that Thad felt somewhat safer, though he knew that it would be possible for even the shaking of the weeds to betray them to their sharp-eyed foes.

At last, however, the boy found his head over an upright bank. Cautiously he let himself down into the yard-deep gully. Then, as child after child squirmed up to the bank, he lifted them down. When Lizzie, the tail of the line, was in the gully, Thad breathed a sigh of relief, and wiped the sweat from his face with his shirt-sleeve.

It was cool here, and the air was free from smoke. For a few minutes all six of them squatted on the gully's bottom, till they could recover from their crawling exertions and from their semi-suffocation. The light from the three fires made objects plainly visible, even down behind the bank.

Thad wanted to peep over, but dared not. After some whispered words to the children, he started down the gully, crouching low as a matter of caution. After him glided the silent line, all stooping. Again Lizzie was bringing up the rear. Their bare feet made no noise on the gravelly gully-bed.

Not till they had followed the winding watercourse nearly a quarter of a mile, and were off in the friendly darkness, did they dare to stop. The gully was much deeper here.

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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While the little Watsons crouched on the bottom, Thad crawled up a sloping bank till he could see the fires. Not only the burning house and corn-crib and straw-stack were now in sight, but also the redskins. They were still sitting on their horses, but had moved west forty or fifty yards, perhaps to escape from the heat. And there they remained half an hour longer, watching the brilliant scene of destruction they had started.

When at length the war-party marched off, following the road that Thad had come, the boy watched them as long as they could be seen; and then he listened to the hoofbeats of their galloping horses till those had died away in the distance.

Now he informed the children that the savages were gone, and he and Lizzie consulted together.

“What can we do, Thad? Where can we go?” the little girl asked.

“Guess maybe we’d better strike out for Fort Blocker.”

“Take us a long time to git there, won’t it? And the little shavers are so little. They’ll give out on the way.”

“That’s so. Let’s see, now. I could carry one of the little girls on my back when she gets tired.”

“Yes, and I could pack Buddy part of the time. But there’s the others. Oh, what can we do? I wish pa and ma would hurry home! They said they’d come before night. And now it’s a long time after dark and they’re not here yit.”

“Lucky for them they didn’t come, and for you

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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children, too, Lizzie. You wouldn't have had any pa and ma by this time."

"But why do you s'pose they stay so long, Thad?"

"I don't know, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Oh, never mind. I don't know why they haven't come."

But the same thing that had occurred to Thad also suggested itself to the girl. "Could it be that they did come, and that the redskins run onto 'em on the road, and—and—" Lizzie's tones rose almost to a wail.

Thad grabbed her by the arm and shook her. "You mustn't make a noise!" he cautioned. "Your folks are just late getting started home, I guess. Maybe something has caused 'em to stay all night at Mr. Perryman's. But there's no place here for us now—no place to eat or sleep; and we'd better make for the fort."

The boy spoke hopefully, to keep the children from becoming excited. But in his heart he more than half believed that Watson and his wife and baby had been murdered by the same savages who had later set fire to their cabin.

Thad now got the children up and out of the gully, and they all started across some weedy stubble-land toward the upper side of the field. There they climbed over the fence into the road. They had been careful to keep out of the circle of light. The roof of the house had fallen in by this time, but the walls were flaming higher than ever. The straw-stack fire was also dying down.

Without delay, Thad turned his charges and started

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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them toward Fort Blocker. But before they had gone a hundred yards, all were thrown into a panic by the trampling of hooped feet not far ahead.

The fence-corners along here were crowded with pokeweeds and similar wild growth. "There! there!" whispered Thad. And he pushed the children in among the big weeds, where they quickly concealed themselves. When all were hid, Thad, too, crept in among the weeds and squatted down.

On came the trampling, though rather slowly. When the animals were but a few feet away, Thad said:

"Why, it's just somebody's mare and colt!"

He stood up, and so did the children. At their sudden appearance the mare snorted and started back. But she did not run.

Now Lizzie said: "It's just old Peggy, our mare. She's comin' home for salt, I guess."

"Is she gentle?" asked Thad. A suggestion had popped into his mind.

"Gentle as a dog," Benny answered.

"You couldn't make her pitch or run away, no matter what you done to her," Lizzie assured him.

"Then, that's how we'll get to the fort," Thad said, in great relief. "All you little shavers can crawl onto her."

"Cain't you ride, too?" Benny wanted to know.

"Wouldn't be room for me if I wanted to. And I'd just as soon walk."

After learning that Watson's saddle and bridle, as well as all the ropes on the place, were in the now flaming corn-crib, Thad said:

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Can I catch her?”

“Anywhere,” Lizzie told him.

So Thad went and caught the mare by the mane. “Here, Lizzie, let me help you up.”

He was lifting her on astride, but she protested indignantly:

“I don’t want to ride astraddle! It’s not nice for girls to ride astraddle!”

“Yes, it’s all right for little girls like you,” he assured her. And she reluctantly consented to assume the despised attitude.

Now Thad set the youngest child up in front of her. “You’ll have to hold to ‘im,” he told her. “That’s why I wanted you to ride boy-fashion. You can hold the little chap better.”

Lizzie put one arm around the child. “Yes, sister will hold ‘im,” she said.

Then Thad set Benny on behind Lizzie, and the two little girls up behind Benny.

“Lucky there’s not any more of you. Now, hang on and tight together, and here we go!”

“But how am I to guide her, without any bridle?”

“I’ll do the guiding, Lizzie. You keep yourself on, and the little shavers on.”

Grasping the mare’s mane, Thad started. Peggy led fairly well at first. But she was old and lazy, and after going a few hundred yards she grew reluctant to leave home. Now, in spite of Thad’s pulling and tugging, she led only at a snail’s pace.

“At this rate, we won’t see Fort Blocker in a week. Got to move faster.”

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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He went off among the brush, which here grew on both sides of the road, and soon returned with a dogwood switch. Again grasping a tuft of mane, he tried to lead the mare and use his switch at the same time. But that was awkward, and he moved back and grasped the mare by the tail. Now, plying the switch, he drove her along the road, and soon had her going at a brisk walk—brisk, at least, for old Peggy.

Every now and then the mare would try to leave the road. But Thad, rushing around to that side, would lash her on the neck till she was glad to turn back. Learning that she would not be permitted to turn aside, the mare took the road and jogged along steadily.

Away they all went, the saddleless, bridleless mare jogging along the winding woods-road, and Thad grasping her tail with one hand and plying his dogwood with the other to keep her going. Close behind Thad followed the colt. In spite of both the switch and some tail-yankings, the mare moved only at a moderate gait. The hindmost little girl looked back and said, scarcely above a whisper:

“Thad keeps tight holt of old Peggy’s tail, so’s she won’t run off and leave ’im.”

Thad laughed noiselessly. “I’m pushing her ten times as much as she’s pulling me,” he answered.

On they moved in silence for half a mile or so. Then Thad spoke again:

“All you children keep all your ears wide open. This country may be just swarming with redskins. Our only chance to slip through is to hear them before they hear us, or see us.”

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Every one promised to do as the boy had requested. The party moved on, the only sounds they made being the noise of the mare's hoofs and the colt's hoofs on the rough road. It was well that they were cautious. For not very much later their strained ears detected trampings somewhere ahead. The children were quick to call Thad's attention to it, but he had already heard. The hoofbeats were fast growing louder.

Letting the mare's tail go and seizing her mane, Thad led her off into the thick woods. Fifty yards from the road he stopped and took hold of the mare's nose.

The horses were soon at hand, moving rapidly. As they dashed by along the road, he could make out that those in the lead were riderless, but some in the rear had riders without hats. By that he knew the riders to be Indians.

It was well that Thad had Peggy by the nose. For while the passing animals were nearest, she tried to nicker to them. That was just what the boy had foreseen. He held her mouth tightly shut.

Not till the hoofbeats had died away in the distance, and several minutes more had passed, did the little party venture back into the road. Now they moved on as before, Thad again clinging to Peggy's tail and encouraging her with his switch. But every few hundred yards he would stop the mare while they all listened intently.

Soon they heard hoofs beating the road again, this time behind them. Again Thad hurried the mare off into the brush. Now they went so far that they could

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## WHILE A BIG RAID GOES ON

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not see the passing animals. Thad surmised that they were cattle. The Comanches did not steal cattle, but these had probably been alarmed by the Indians.

Returning to the road, the party had proceeded another few hundred yards, when they again had to hurry off into the brush. Before the boy could lead Peggy far, a single horseman clattered by at furious speed, riding toward the fort. The fellow was bare-headed; but so recklessly did he ride that Thad believed him to be both a white man and a hard-pressed, terrified fugitive.

Soon other flying horsemen dashed by. The boy had retreated farther and could not see these, but he had no doubt that they were redskins in pursuit of the white man.

“Reckon they’ll overhaul ’im, Thad?” Lizzie wanted to know, after the boy had explained who he thought the horsemen were.

“If hard riding can save him, they won’t. And I hope they won’t.”

“So do I. But wouldn’t it be dreadful if they did?”

Thad agreed with her that it would be dreadful—very dreadful. After waiting a prudent length of time, he led the mare back to the road, and they moved on toward the fort. He would have been glad to abandon the road. But the woods were so thick here that he could not hope to find his way through them in the dark.

At length they emerged upon the prairie. Here they were more afraid, especially as the moon had already risen. While they could now see as well as hear, they

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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would no longer be able to hide if Indians came; or, at least, not to hide the mare and colt.

After jogging along for a mile or more, the fugitives were again alarmed by the noise of hoofs, off to the west. Thad listened till sure that the animals were approaching, then hastily helped the children to dismount. Leaving the lazy mare and her colt grazing, the whole party fled. Two hundred yards or more from the road they threw themselves down in the tall, thick grass.



## XXVIII

### AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

WHILE all the little Watsons lay as flat as they could flatten themselves, Thad kept his head high enough to peep through the grass-tops. As soon as the moving animals came near, he could make out they they were cattle. These, too, were running, almost at the top of their speed, as if something or somebody had frightened them.

They soon passed, but Thad and the children remained in hiding for at least a quarter of an hour longer. Hearing nothing more to alarm them, they sprang up and hurried back to the still grazing mare. Thad helped his young charges to mount again, and once more they moved on toward the fort. The moon was now high enough to light the whole prairie. But the fugitives would have preferred darkness.

While Thad and the Watson children were trying hard to reach Fort Blocker, numerous interesting events were taking place there. It was not long after dark that a messenger arrived from the patrol line, thirty miles or more to the west, reporting that at noon that

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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day a big band of Indians, numbering about a hundred, had driven the scouts back and forced them to take refuge in a settler's stockade. The Comanches had marched boldly on into the settlements, and were doubtless spreading death and destruction as they went. Lieutenant Reel, who had sent the messenger, asked for reinforcements, that they might be ready to attack the savages as they passed back.

This news quickly spread over the fort and created the wildest alarm. Captain Totty and his State troops had marched away several days before, and were now somewhere off to the southwest—far beyond the reach of a messenger. There were fewer than twenty men in the fort. With a big war-party of Comanches devastating the surrounding country, it would be reckless for these men to ride away and leave the fort unprotected.

Soon family after family began to arrive, seeking safety—people who lived only two or three miles away. One family, in a two-horse wagon, drove into the square at a gallop. But most of them came quietly, either on horseback or afoot. And all had stories to tell of marauding bands of redskins seen or heard. From the number of bands reported, Captain Graham was of the opinion that the big war-party, after penetrating the settlements, had broken up into numerous little bands, which were now scouring the settlements in quest of horses and scalps.

While the excitement in the fort was at its height, another man dashed in on a sweat-wet horse. He was riding bareback, and was also bare-headed. It was Watson.

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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He reported that he and his wife had been detained at Perryman's till almost dark. When a mile or so from home, they had seen a bright light ahead, which convinced them that their cabin was in flames. Fearing the worst, Watson had stopped and unharnessed his horses, and sent his wife and baby back to Perryman's on one horse. The Perrymans, a numerous family, lived inside of a stockade. Watson himself had mounted the other horse and come on.

Arriving at his homestead, he had found his house, his corn-crib and his strawstack all crumbling into fiery ruins. His dog lay dead, but not one of his children could be seen. Whether they had been murdered and their bodies left in the cabin to be consumed, or had been dragged away as captives, he could only guess. Hoping that they were captives, he was just starting to Fort Blocker for assistance in rescuing them, when a little band of Indians—the ones who had fired the cabin, or others—came round the hill on the same road he himself had come. They discovered him at the moment he discovered them. Now a race began promptly, in the direction of Fort Blocker.

Not till Watson had run two or three miles, and had lost his hat, did he succeed in shaking off his pursuers. Then he kept right on to the fort.

Not knowing whether Watson's children were dead or captives—it had not occurred to anybody that they had escaped—Captain Graham was undecided what to do. It seemed cruel to refuse assistance; and yet it was risky to take the men away from the fort, which itself was in danger of an attack.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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While the discussion was being held in front of Mr. Wilkins's house, Mr. Dayberry, who had just heard of Watson's news, came to report that Thad was believed to have gone to the Watson place this afternoon, and that he had probably shared the fate of the children there, whether death or captivity.

"But Thad would fight. He would have defended the house if he'd been there, wouldn't he?" asked Captain Graham.

"The red raiders might have surprised them all," Mr. Welborn spoke up.

"That's the strange thing about it," Thad's father explained. "Thad went to git his horse, but he's never come back for the saddle or his rifle. I walked across the creek to where he said the horse was staked, but the horse wasn't there. So I s'pose the boy must have jumped on 'im and made the trip bareback. Though I cain't understand why he should do such a thing. And his mother cain't, either."

"It's plain that he did do such a thing," remarked Mr. Trueblood.

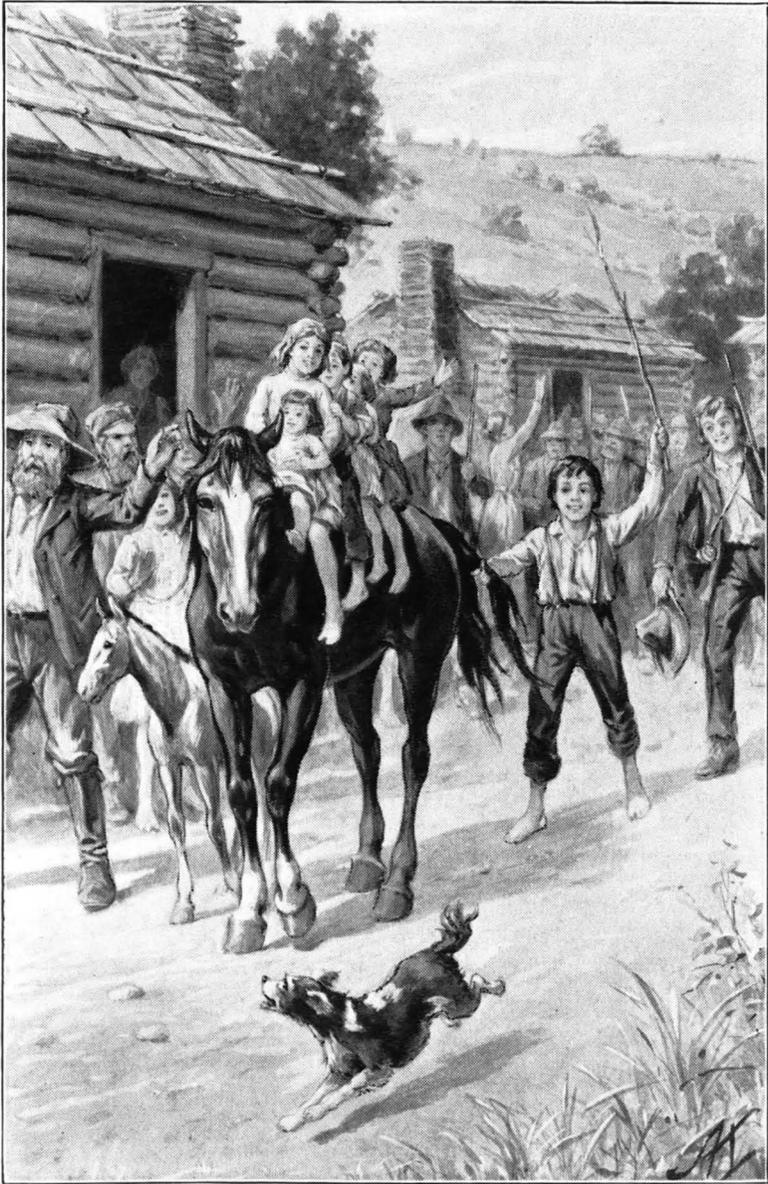
"It certainly is," agreed Mr. Hendricks.

"Not much doubt about that," spoke out big Tim Hart, owner of the ox-mill, in his strong voice. "My guess is that Thad Dayberry and the Watson children are either all dead together or all prisoners together. If they're—"

"No such thing!" called out a voice, almost indignantly. It sounded very much like Thad's.

Just then there came round the corner of the Wilkins house a bridleless mare, covered with children from her





"ALL FIVE OF THEM; YOU CAN COUNT THEM FOR YOURSELF."

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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withers to her hips. And close behind her followed a boy and a colt. The boy, grasping her tail, was steering her with one hand and switching her lazy hips with the other.

“Thad Dayberry, or I’m a liar!” exclaimed Jess Holloway, almost in consternation.

“That you, Thad? And who’s this—who are all these you’ve got with you?” asked Captain Graham, when the small procession had halted near the crowd.

“They’re the little Watsons, Captain. The redskins fired Mr. Watson’s house, and everything else of his that would burn. And they may have killed him and his wife and baby. But the other children are here and safe—all five of ’em. You can count ’em for yourself if you doubt it!”

“But we would have been if it hadn’t been for Thad,” spoke up Lizzie, from the mare’s back.

“Yes, we would—that we would, every last one of us!” declared Benny.

The sensation that followed the discovery of who the latest arrivals were can scarcely be described. When it was over, Thad was called upon to tell how he had effected the little party’s escape. He began in a modest way, but Lizzie, becoming excited, took the story out of the boy’s mouth, so to speak, and went on with it herself, rapidly, enthusiastically. And the younger children interrupted her often to supply the details she was leaving out.

“Well done, Thad boy!” exclaimed the captain of the scouts, when the story of their escape and of their making their way to the fort had been concluded.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“Yes, I’d say it was well done,” agreed Mr. Wilkins, heartily. “I’d like to set eyes on the *man* that could do it better.”

Here spoke up another member of the group, a stranger to Thad. His name was Jasper. He was a preacher, and he had just arrived in Fort Blocker this afternoon, in company with another preacher named Keeney. They had come for the purpose of holding a “big meeting” at the fort—a revival.

“Men,” Mr. Jasper said, “I don’t know how it looks to you people out here. But to a man who doesn’t live on the frontier, it seems a pretty brave, heroic sort of thing that this barefooted boy has done. He’s evidently a boy that doesn’t lose his head when he needs it worst, as too many grown-up people do. He deserves a lot of praise.”

“If anybody ever did, he does,” agreed Mr. Keeney, the other preacher, who was also in the crowd.

“Oh, that wasn’t anything to speak of,” protested Thad, in no little embarrassment. “Didn’t think I was going to sit down and let the redskins kill and scalp us all, did you? Not as long as I could help myself! And nobody else would, either.”

“Thad’s the boy that can fool the red boogers!” Bill Cogburn called out.

“That he can!” answered Mr. Weese. “Cain’t nobody git ahead of Thad—”

“Nobody except Harbolt!” put in Jess Holloway.

At that everybody laughed. But it was very kindly, good-natured laughter.

When Thad went home, he found that Mr. Jasper,

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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the preacher, was spending the night there. Mr. Keeney, who had been with the Wilkins family, also came over, with his saddle-bags. Watson and his five children, being relatives of the Wilkinses, were all at the Wilkins house, and little room was left there for any other company.

Thad's mother was of the same religious faith as these preachers, and so were both Mrs. Wilkins and her husband. Christians they called themselves, repudiating, almost as an insult, all church names of human invention. These people, the youngest, but by no means the least aggressive, were vying with the Baptists, the Methodists and the Presbyterians for the conversion of this new country.

Pickets were kept out around the fort till daylight. Then Captain Graham started out with a party of scouts—all the men that could safely be spared. The two preachers volunteered to go, but the captain told them to stay as a guard for the fort.

Not till late next day did the party return. They had followed the Indians' trail westward, but had not overtaken them. The scouts out on the patrol-line reported that the red raiders had been seen marching rapidly west on the morning after the raid, with a great drove of stolen horses. The scouts, being too few, had not dared to give battle.

Several men had been killed in different parts of the country, but all the fort people had escaped. Most of the settlers here had, however, lost all their horses that were out on the range. Among the animals swept away was a little drove belonging to Thad's father.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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For two or three days Thad believed that his young horse, Ped, had gone with the others. But it came out that, after Thad had pursued the drove his horse was with, they had run straight home. Their owner, Chunky Joe Wilson, thinking that Indians might have been after them, had penned them all. Thus they had escaped being driven off, and Ped with them. Roe, one of the Wilson boys, knowing whose the animal was, brought him to the fort the third day after the raid. Now Ped and Mr. Dayberry's saddle-horse were the only horses the family had left.

While the scouts were still out, most of the men and boys in the fort were busy, preparing for the expected big meeting. Down on the north branch, between the road and the spring, a large-sized arbor, or brush-shed, was erected.

Thad and Charley Dick walked down together and seated themselves together on the men's side of the arbor. Charley Dick wore a cotton shirt and cotton pantaloons, and was barefooted. But Thad was arrayed in a blue cotton shirt and brand-new buckskin pantaloons. He himself had killed the deer, before moving to the fort, and tanned the skin since moving here. His mother had only recently cut out and made the pantaloons for him, for this occasion. Also, his feet were sweating and sweltering in a pair of new, home-made shoes.

"Just see the folks gazin' at you, Thad!" whispered Charley Dick, after some people living a few miles from the fort, in the Menasco settlement, had come under the arbor and seated themselves.

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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Thad blushed. "Huh! What they gazing at me for?"

"Oh, you've gone and done it this time!" declared his admiring friend. "The whole Watson family have been tootin' your praises ever since you fetched 'em down here. It's little anybody cares for Harbolt's watermelons now. Everybody's talkin' about you. And they're talkin' you sky-high, too!"

"Oh, shucks, now!" protested the embarrassed hero.

"You can 'oh, shucks,' all you want to, Thad Dayberry! But it's the livin' truth I'm tellin' you, so 'elp me!" Charley Dick assured him.

Many of the older people in the fort were church-members; and as stern as the old Puritans in their moral ideas. And both those who were members and those who were not came to the meeting. For this was to be a great occasion—one long to be remembered here. Captain Totty and most, or all, of his company of State troops had returned to headquarters, and the fort was a lively place.

And not only the people of Fort Blocker came to the meeting, but all the settlers for miles around, including many from two neighboring forts, one on Bingham Creek and the other on Denton Creek. Most of the people were on horseback, but others came in ox-wagons or horse-wagons. And all came armed. Their guns they left in their wagon-beds, those who brought wagons. But their six-shooters remained belted on. Several men, who had come to meeting on horseback, brought their guns in and either laid them under the seats or sat with them between their knees.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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A few of the fort people brought chairs to sit in, and so did some who came in wagons. Those were the only seats with backs. Part of the seats provided under the arbor were benches—split logs with four wooden pegs for legs. The benches were borrowed from various settlers, and from the little schoolhouse down below the fort. But other seats were logs, elevated by being laid across other logs, and smoothed a little on top with an axe.

Of clothes there was a great variety. Most of the people, of both sexes, wore homespun. But some of the men had on tailor-made suits, all much wrinkled from being long hidden away in trunks. And others, like Thad, were wholly or partly clad in buckskin. A few, among them Mr. Keeney, one of the preachers, were dressed in linen from head to foot.

On the women's side of the arbor the same or a greater variety of dress prevailed. In addition to the usual homespun, there were several silk and satin dresses—relics of other States and other days. All but a very few wore sun-bonnets instead of hats; and, after getting under the arbor, they took them off and held them in their laps. For fans they used wild turkeys' wings or tails. Some of the young women and most of the younger girls were dressed in white. And, whether in white or homespun, they looked very charming, many of them. For Fort Blocker had its full share of pretty girls—more than its share, most people said.

But the prettiest of all, in Thad's eyes, was his unfriendly little neighbor, Marzee. Dressed in white, she sat well up toward the front, with Tilda Totty and Sally

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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Cogburn on one side of her, and Roxy Weese and Martha Graham on the other. Thad looked often at the row of girls, but they never so much as glanced back.

One thing he noticed particularly. Marzee was fanning herself with a shiny-black fan—blacker, and also prettier, as he thought, than any other girl was using. He had seen that fan before, but never since he had sent it to her until to-day. It was his crow's wing.

When all the people had come together, Mr. Jasper, a little, wiry man with a smooth face and a wide mouth, arose and said:

“We will open the meeting by singing.”

There were various hymn-books and song-books in the audience. But as few of them were alike, and most of the people had none, the preacher proceeded to line out a hymn:

“How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word.”

When, Mr. Keeney leading, the congregation had sung those two lines, Mr. Jasper lined out another couplet:

“What more can He say than to you He hath said,  
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?”

And so the congregation sang through that and several similar hymns. After the Scripture reading and prayer came the sermon, with much fiery, forceful eloquence in it. For a very intelligent man was Terrell Jasper, very earnest and very impressive. Many a sorrier sermon was preached in cities this Sunday morning than was preached under the brush-shed by this rude frontier fort.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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When the meeting had been dismissed, everybody asked everybody else to go home with them for dinner, and most of those from outside the fort accepted some invitation.

About the middle of the afternoon the people came together under the arbor again, to listen to another sermon, this time by Mr. Keeney. A very tall man, of striking appearance, was the preacher, with blue eyes, a fair complexion, and light or yellowish hair reaching almost to his shoulders. His wife had taught him to read, but he was a born orator. Not a word of what the preacher said did Thad miss.

The sermon ended, the whole congregation marched from the arbor down to the creek-bank, below the spring. There several converts, made by the day's preaching, were baptized in the stream by Mr. Jasper. Among them were Lou Totty and Sarah Jane Totty, daughters of the captain of the State troops, and Molly Welborn, daughter of the Dayberrys' nearest neighbor on the south. These were but a few of the more than sixty people who would be baptized here during the next few weeks. For this was the beginning of one of the greatest revivals ever yet held on the Texas frontier.

When the baptizing was ended, the crowd was dismissed till "early candle-lighting."

Even before sunset the people began to reassemble under the arbor. Charley Dick came by for Thad, and the two went down together. They found a numerous crowd, all chatting and joking and laughing. For, in spite of the fact that they might at any moment be called upon to fight for their lives, a cheerful, jolly peo-

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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ple were these pioneers, in their fort on the edge of the wilds. Neither hardships nor poverty nor dangers seemed to discourage them in the least.

Thad's eyes ran everywhere in search of Marzee, but she was not there. While he was looking toward the Wilkins house, to see if she was coming, his father said:

"Thad, the water-bucket's empty. Wouldn't you like to take it, you and Charley Dick, and go to the spring before preachin' begins?"

"Yes, sir; we'll go. Come on, Charley Dick!"

So the two got the bucket and started off. And several of the little boys, Jimmy Hendricks and Hamp Witt and Bailey Cogburn and Travis Holloway and Billy Reel, went with them.

On arriving at the spring, they found a small crowd of boys already there, and three girls—Marzee Wilkins, Tilda Totty and Sally Cogburn. The boys were standing together, back a few yards. The girls were also together, and were washing their hands in the little stream flowing out of the spring, and wiping them with their handkerchiefs.

"Oh, Thad, I'm so glad you've come!" exclaimed Tilda. "Give me that gourd, won't you? Somebody has carried off the spring-gourd. We girls are just dying for a drink."

"Why don't you lay down and drink, like us boys did?" asked Buck Thompson.

"Because we don't want to—that's why," answered Tilda, as she received the gourd from Thad and dipped it into the spring.

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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Marzee was wearing a red flower pinned to the bosom of her white dress. While the other girls were drinking, Buck approached and pointed to the flower.

"Marzee, give me that hollyhawk."

The girl shook her head. "That hollyhock does well enough where it is," she answered, softly.

"Savin' it for one of them Campbellite preachers, eh?"

Marzee's slender figure straightened, and her eyes almost flashed as she exclaimed:

"Don't you dare call us Campbellites, Buck Thompson! Don't you dare—don't you dare!"

"What are you, then?"

"Don't you dare! We're Christians—that's what we are! We don't have any creeds. We don't believe anything but the Bible! We won't wear any name but Bible names! Don't you dare nickname us! Don't you dare!"

Buck, surprised, subsided before the usually shy little girl's vehemence. But while Marzee was drinking, Jimmy Hendricks cried:

"Look out, Marzee! Buck's tryin' to snatch your blossom!"

The girl sprang lightly back. "Buck, I told you you couldn't have this hollyhock!"

"Bet you I git it yit! Bet you a dollar I do!" he declared, boldly.

Marzee glanced shyly around. Then she unpinned the flower and held it to her nose. "No, you won't get it, Buck. If I was to give it away, it wouldn't be to you."

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## AFTER THE RAID IS OVER

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“Then, who would it be to? Tell me that!”

“It would be to somebody that’s nice, and doesn’t try to snatch things,” Marzee answered, in her softest tones. “It would be to somebody that can do things worth while. It would be to—”

Her back was to the two boys with the water-bucket. But now she turned suddenly, and, with drooping eyelids, and a smile as bright as the flower itself, held out the hollyhock to Thad.

The boy’s face flushed with pleasure, not unmixed with surprise. Weeks had gone by since she had last spoken to him. “It’s—it’s mighty nice of you to—to give me this, Marzee,” he stammered, as he received her gift—her overture of renewed friendship. His manner was not a little embarrassed, but his heart was beating delightedly. For he knew that at last their quarrel was ended.

“Oh, now we know—now we know!” cried out little Billy Reel.

“What is it we know?” Harrison Hendricks inquired.

“Why, who it is Marzee likes best!”

“Shut up, you little sass-box!” ordered the girl, her face flushing prettily.

Just then, as if to relieve Marzee’s embarrassment, came from the arbor Mr. Jasper’s strong voice, lining out a hymn. Very distinct were the words in the twilight stillness:

“On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand  
And cast a wistful eye—”

When the congregation had sung these lines came the preacher’s voice again:

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## FORT BLOCKER BOYS

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“To Canaan's fair and happy land  
Where my possessions lie.”

“Meeting has begun. Let's be going, girls,” said Marzee. And of one accord the three, turning, moved down the gravelly creek-bed and up the bank.

Thad dipped the bucket of water from the spring, and then he and Charley Dick followed. And with those two trooped along the crowd of little boys.

On top of the bank, the girls put their arms around one another. Then, as they moved toward the lights, twinkling through the dusk, that indicated where the arbor was, they, too, began to sing, softly, sweetly, in their girlish voices.

It was all very calm and peaceful, and very beautiful, this cool twilight scene. And no matter what Time the trouble-maker may bring us, we who saw it will never forget—shall never live long enough to forget—can never travel far enough to forget.

And it is well to leave them here, these boys and girls of old Fort Blocker.



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