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THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

I

TWO RUNAWAYS FROM LONESOME

THE days of that April had been days of mist and rain. Sometimes, for hours, there would come a miracle of blue sky, white cloud, and yellow light, but always between dark and dark the rain would fall and the mist creep up the mountains and steam from the tops—only to roll together from either range, drip back into the valleys, and lift, straightway, as mist again. So that, all the while Nature was trying to give lustier life to every living thing in the lowland Bluegrass, all the while a gaunt skeleton was stalking down the Cumberland—tapping with fleshless knuckles, now at some unlovely cottage of faded white and green, and now at a log cabin, stark and gray. Passing the mouth of Lonesome, he flashed his scythe into its unlifting shadows and went stalking on. High up, at the source of the dismal little stream, the point of the shining blade darted thrice into the

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open door of a cabin set deep into a shaggy flank of Black Mountain, and three spirits, within, were quickly loosed from aching flesh for the long flight into the unknown.

It was the spirit of the plague that passed, taking with it the breath of the unlucky and the unfit: and in the hut on Lonesome three were dead—a gaunt mountaineer, a gaunt daughter, and a gaunt son. Later, the mother, too, “jes’ kind o’ got tired,” as little Chad said, and soon to her worn hands and feet came the well-earned rest. Nobody was left then but Chad and Jack, and Jack was a dog with a belly to feed and went for less than nothing with everybody but his little master and the chance mountaineer who had sheep to guard. So, for the fourth time, Chad, with Jack at his heels, trudged up to the point of a wooded spur above the cabin, where, at the foot of a giant poplar and under a wilderness of shaking June leaves, were three piles of rough boards, loosely covering three hillocks of rain-beaten earth; and, near them, an open grave. There was no service sung or spoken over the dead, for the circuit-rider was then months away; so, unnoticed, Chad stood behind the big poplar, watching the neighbors gently let down into the shallow trench a home-made coffin, rudely hollowed from the half of a bee-gum log, and, unnoticed, slipped away at the first muffled stroke of the dirt—doubling his fists into his eyes and stum-

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bling against the gnarled bodies of laurel and rhododendron until, out in a clear sunny space, he dropped on a thick, velvet mat of moss and sobbed himself to sleep. When he awoke, Jack was licking his face and he sat up, dazed and yawning. The sun was dropping fast, the ravines were filling with blue shadows, luminous and misty, and a far drowsy tinkling from the valley told him that cows were starting homeward. From habit, he sprang quickly to his feet, but, sharply conscious on a sudden, dropped slowly back to the moss again, while Jack, who had started down the spur, circled back to see what the matter was, and stood with uplifted foot, much puzzled.

There had been a consultation about Chad early that morning among the neighbors, and old Nathan Cherry, who lived over on Stone Creek, in the next cove but one, said that he would take charge of the boy. Nathan did not wait for the burial, but went back home for his wagon, leaving word that Chad was to stay all night with a neighbor and meet him at the death-stricken cabin an hour by sun. The old man meant to have Chad bound to him for seven years by law—the boy had been told that—and Nathan hated dogs as much as Chad hated Nathan. So the lad did not lie long. He did not mean to be bound out, nor to have Jack mistreated, and he rose quickly and Jack sprang before him down the rocky path and toward the

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hut that had been a home to both. Under the poplar, Jack sniffed curiously at the new-made grave, and Chad called him away so sharply that Jack's tail drooped and he crept toward his master, as though to ask pardon for a fault of which he was not conscious. For one moment, Chad stood looking. Again the stroke of the falling earth smote his ears and his eyes filled; a curious pain caught him by the throat and he passed on, whistling—down into the shadows below to the open door of the cabin.

It was deathly still. The homespun bedclothes and hand-made quilts of brilliant colors had been thrown in a heap on one of the two beds of hickory withes; the kitchen utensils—a crane and a few pots and pans—had been piled on the hearth, along with strings of herbs and beans and red pepper-pods—all ready for old Nathan when he should come over for them, next morning, with his wagon. Not a living thing was to be heard or seen that suggested human life, and Chad sat down in the deepening loneliness, watching the shadows rise up the green walls that bound him in, and wondering what he should do, and where he should go, if he was not to go to old Nathan; while Jack, who seemed to know that some crisis was come, settled on his haunches a little way off, to wait, with perfect faith and patience, for the boy to make up his mind.

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It was the first time, perhaps, that Chad had ever thought very seriously about himself, or wondered who he was, or whence he had come. Digging back into his memory as far as he could, it seemed to him that what had just happened now had happened to him once before, and that he had simply wandered away. He could not recollect where he had started from first, but he could recall many of the places where he had lived, and why he had left them—usually because somebody, like old Nathan, had wanted to have him bound out, or had misused Jack, or would not let the two stray off into the woods together, when there was nothing else to be done. He had stayed longest where he was now, because the old man and his son and his girl had all taken a great fancy to Jack, and had let the two guard cattle in the mountains and drive sheep and, if they stayed out in the woods over night, struck neither a stroke of hand nor tongue. The old mother had been his mother and, once more, Chad leaned his head against the worn lintel and wept silently. So far, nobody had seemed to care particularly who he was, or was not—nor had Chad. Most people were very kind to him, looking upon him as one of the wandering waifs that one finds throughout the Cumberland, upon whom the good folks of the mountains do not visit the father's sin. He knew what he was thought to be, and it mattered so little, since it made no discrimi-

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nation against him, that he had accepted it without question. It did not matter now, except as it bore on the question as to where he should start his feet. It was a long time for him to have stayed in one place, and the roving memories, stirred within him now, took root, doubtless, in the restless spirit that had led his unknown ancestor into those mountain wilds after the Revolution.

All this while he had been sitting on the low threshold, with his elbows in the hollows of his thighs and his left hand across his mouth. Once more, he meant to be bound to no man's service and, at the final thought of losing Jack, the liberty-loving little tramp spat over his hand with sharp decision and rose.

Just above him and across the buck antlers over the door, lay a long flint-lock rifle; a bullet-pouch, a powder-horn, and a small raccoon-skin haversack hung from one of the prongs: and on them the boy's eyes rested longingly. Old Nathan, he knew, claimed that the dead man had owed him money; and he further knew that old Nathan meant to take all he could lay his hands on in payment: but he climbed resolutely upon a chair and took the things down, arguing the question, meanwhile:

"Uncle Jim said once he aimed to give this rifle gun to me. Mebbe he was foolin', but I don't believe he owed ole Nathan so much, an', anyways," he muttered grimly, "I reckon Uncle Jim 'ud kind

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o' like fer me to git the better of that ole devil—jes' a *leetle*, anyways."

The rifle, he knew, was always loaded; there was not much powder in the horn and there were not more than a dozen bullets in the pouch, but they would last him until he could get far away. No more would he take, however, than what he thought he could get along with—one blanket from the bed and, from the fireplace, a little bacon and a pone of corn-bread.

"An' I *know* Aunt Jane wouldn't 'a' keered about these leetle fixin's, fer I have to have 'em, an' I know I've earned 'em anyways."

Then he closed the door softly on the spirits of the dead within, and caught the short, deer-skin latch-string to the wooden pin outside. With his Barlow knife, he swiftly stripped a bark string from a pawpaw bush near by, folded and tied his blanket, and was swinging the little pack to his shoulder, when the tinkle of a cow-bell came through the bushes, close at hand. Old Nance, lean and pied, was coming home; he had forgotten her, it was getting late, and he was anxious to leave for fear some neighbor might come; but there was no one to milk and, when she drew near with a low moo, he saw that her udders were full and dripping. It would hurt her to go unmilked, so Chad put his things down and took up a cedar piggin from a shelf outside the cabin and

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did the task thoroughly—putting the strippings in a cup and, so strong was the habit in him, hurrying with both to the rude spring-house and setting them in cool running water. A moment more and he had his pack and his rifle on one shoulder and was climbing the fence at the wood-pile. There he stopped once more with a sudden thought, and wrenching loose a short axe from the face of a hickory log, staggered under the weight of his weapons up the mountain. The sun was yet an hour high and, on the spur, he leaned his rifle against the big poplar and set to work with his axe on a sapling close by—talking frankly now to the God who made him:

“I reckon You know it, but I’m a-goin’ to run away now. I hain’t got no daddy an’ no mammy, an’ I hain’t niver had none as I knows—but Aunt Jane hyeh—she’s been jes’ like a mother to me an’ I’m a-doin’ fer her jes’ whut I wish You’d have somebody do fer my mother, ef You know whar she’s a-layin’.”

Eight round sticks he cut swiftly—four long and four short—and with these he built a low pen, as is the custom of the mountaineers, close about the fresh mound, and, borrowing a board or two from each of the other mounds, covered the grave from the rain. Then he sunk the axe into the trunk of the great poplar as high up as he could reach—so that it could easily be seen

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—and, brushing the sweat from his face, he knelt down:

“God!” he said, simply, “I hain’t nothin’ but a boy, but I got to ack like a man now. I’m a-goin’ now. I don’t believe You keer much and seems like I bring ever’body bad luck: an’ I’m a-goin’ to live up hyeh on the mountain jus’ as long as I can. I don’t want you to think I’m a-complainin’—fer I ain’t. Only hit does seem sort o’ curious that You’d let me be down hyeh—with me a-keerin’ fer nobody now, an’ nobody a-keerin’ fer me. But Thy ways is inscrutable—leastwise, that’s whut the circuit-rider says—an’ I ain’t got a word more to say—Amen.”

Chad rose then and Jack, who had sat perfectly still, with his head cocked to one side, and his ears straight forward in wonder over this strange proceeding, sprang into the air, when Chad picked up his gun, and, with a joyful bark, circled a clump of bushes and sped back, leaping as high as the little fellow’s head and trying to lick his face—for Jack was a rover, too.

The sun was low when the two waifs turned their backs upon it, and the blue shadows in valley and ravine were darkening fast. Down the spur they went swiftly—across the river and up the slope of Pine Mountain. As they climbed, Chad heard the last faint sound of a cow-bell far below him and he stopped short, with a lump in his throat that

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hurt. Soon darkness fell, and, on the very top, the boy made a fire with his flint and steel, cooked a little bacon, warmed his corn-pone, munched them and, wrapping his blanket around him and letting Jack curl into the hollow of his legs and stomach, turned his face to the kindly stars and went to sleep.

II

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

TWICE, during the night, Jack roused him by trying to push himself farther under the blanket and Chad rose to rebuild the fire. The third time he was awakened by the subtle pre-science of dawn and his eyes opened on a flaming radiance in the east. Again from habit he started to spring hurriedly to his feet and, again sharply conscious, he lay down again. There was no wood to cut, no fire to rekindle, no water to carry from the spring, no cow to milk, no corn to hoe; there was nothing to do—nothing. Morning after morning, with a day's hard toil at a man's task before him, what would he not have given, when old Jim called him, to have stretched his aching little legs down the folds of the thick feather-bed and slipped back into the delicious rest of sleep and dreams. Now he was his own master and, with a happy sense of freedom, he brushed the dew from his face and, shifting the chunk under his head, pulled his old cap down a little more on one side and closed his eyes. But sleep would not come and