

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

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

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

Chad had his first wonder over the perverse result of the full choice to do, or not to do. At once, the first keen savor of freedom grew less sweet to his nostrils and, straightway, he began to feel the first pressure of the chain of duties that was to be forged for him out of his perfect liberty, link by link, and he lay vaguely wondering.

Meanwhile, the lake of dull red behind the jagged lines of rose and crimson that streaked the east began to glow and look angry. A sheen of fiery vapor shot upward and spread swiftly over the miracle of mist that had been wrought in the night. An ocean of it and, white and thick as snow-dust, it filled valley, chasm, and ravine with mystery and silence up to the dark jutting points and dark waving lines of range after range that looked like breakers, surged up by some strange new law from an under-sea of foam; motionless, it swept down the valleys, poured swift torrents through high gaps in the hills and one long noiseless cataract over a lesser range—all silent, all motionless, like a great white sea stilled in the fury of a storm. Morning after morning, the boy had looked upon just such glory, calmly watching the mist part, like the waters, for the land, and the day break, with one phrase, "Let there be light," ever in his mind—for Chad knew his Bible. And, most often, in soft splendor, trailing cloud-mist, and yellow light leaping from crest to crest, and in the singing of

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

birds and the shining of leaves and dew—there was light.

But that morning there was a hush in the woods that Chad understood. On a sudden, a light wind scurried through the trees and showered the mist-drops down. The smoke from his fire shot through the low undergrowth, without rising, and the starting mists seemed to clutch with long, white fingers at the tree-tops, as though loath to leave the safe, warm earth for the upper air. A little later, he felt some great shadow behind him, and he turned his face to see black clouds marshalling on either flank of the heavens and fitting their black wings together, as though the retreating forces of the night were gathering for a last sweep against the east. A sword flashed blindingly from the dome high above them and, after it, came one shaking peal that might have been the command to charge, for Chad saw the black hosts start fiercely. A far off, the wind was coming; the trees began to sway above him, and the level sea of mist below began to swell, and the wooded breakers seemed to pitch angrily.

Challenging tongues ran quivering up the east, and the lake of red coals under them began to heave fiercely in answer. On either side the lightning leaped upward and forward, striking straight and low, sometimes, as though it were ripping up the horizon to let into the conflict the host of dropping

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

stars. Then the artillery of the thunder crashed in earnest through the shaking heavens, and the mists below pitched like smoke belched from gigantic unseen cannon. The coming sun answered with upleaping swords of fire and, as the black thunder hosts swept overhead, Chad saw, for one moment, the whole east in a writhing storm of fire. A thick darkness rose from the first crash of battle and, with the rush of wind and rain, the mighty conflict went on unseen.

Chad had seen other storms at sunrise, but something happened now and he could never recall the others nor ever forget this. All it meant to him, young as he was then, was unrolled slowly as the years came on—more than the first great rebellion of the powers of darkness when, in the beginning, the Master gave the first command that the seven days' work of His hand should float through space, smitten with the welcoming rays of a million suns; more than the beginning thus of light—of life; more even than the first birth of a spirit in a living thing: for, long afterward, he knew that it meant the dawn of a new consciousness to him—the birth of a new spirit within him, and the foreshadowed pain of its slow mastery over his passion-racked body and heart. Never was there a crisis, bodily or spiritual, on the battle-field or alone under the stars, that this storm did not come back to him. And, always, through all doubt, and, indeed, in the

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

end, when it came to him for the last time on his bed of death, the slow and sullen dispersion of wind and rain on the mountain that morning far, far back in his memory, and the quick coming of the Sun-king's victorious light over the glad hills and trees held out to him the promise of a final victory to the sun-king's King over the darkness of all death and the final coming to his own brave spirit of peace and rest.

So Chad, with Jack drawn close to him, lay back, awe-stricken and with his face wet from mysterious tears. The comfort of the childish self-pity that came with every thought of himself, wandering, a lost spirit along the mountain-tops, was gone like a dream and ready in his heart was the strong new purpose to strike into the world for himself. He even took it as a good omen, when he rose, to find his fire quenched, the stopper of his powder-horn out, and the precious black grains scattered hopelessly on the wet earth. There were barely more than three charges left, and something had to be done at once. First, he must get farther away from old Nathan: the neighbors might search for him and find him and take him back.

So he started out, brisk and shivering, along the ridge path with Jack bouncing before him. An hour later, he came upon a hollow tree, filled with doty wood which he could tear out with his hands and he built a fire and broiled a little more bacon.

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

Jack got only a bit this time and barked reproachfully for more; but Chad shook his head and the dog started out, with both eyes open, to look for his own food. The sun was high enough now to make the drenched world flash like an emerald and its warmth felt good, as Chad tramped the topmost edge of Pine Mountain, where the brush was not thick and where, indeed, he often found a path running a short way and turning into some ravine—the trail of cattle and sheep and the pathway between one little valley settlement and another. He must have made ten miles and more by noon—for he was a sturdy walker and as tireless almost as Jack—and ten miles is a long way in the mountains, even now. So, already, Chad was far enough away to have no fear of pursuit, even if old Nathan wanted him back, which was doubtful. On the top of the next point, Jack treed a squirrel and Chad took a rest and brought him down, shot through the head and, then and there, skinned and cooked him and divided with Jack squarely.

"Jack," he said, as he reloaded his gun, "we can't keep this up much longer. I hain't got more'n two more loads o' powder here."

And, thereupon, Jack leaped suddenly in the air and, turning quite around, lighted with his nose pointed, as it was before he sprang. Chad cocked the old gun and stepped forward. A low hissing whirl rose a few feet to one side of the path

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

and, very carefully, the boy climbed a fallen trunk and edged his way, very carefully, toward the sound: and there, by a dead limb and with his ugly head reared three inches above his coil of springs, was a rattlesnake. The sudden hate in the boy's face was curious—it was instinctive, primitive, deadly. He must shoot off-hand now and he looked down the long barrel, shaded with tin, until the sight caught on one of the beady, unblinking eyes and pulled the trigger. Jack leaped with the sound, in spite of Chad's yell of warning, which was useless, for the ball had gone true and the poison was set loose in the black, crushed head.

"Jack," said Chad, "we just *got* to go down now."

So they went on swiftly through the heat of the early afternoon. It was very silent up there. Now and then, a brilliant blue-jay would lilt from a stunted oak with the flute-like love-notes of spring; or a lonely little brown fellow would hop with a low chirp from one bush to another as though he had been lost up there for years and had grown quite hopeless about seeing his kind again. When there was a gap in the mountains, he could hear the querulous, senseless love-quarrel of flickers going on below him; passing a deep ravine, the note of the wood-thrush—that shy lyrist of the hills—might rise to him from a dense covert of maple and beech: or, with a startling call, a red-crested

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

cock of the woods would beat his white-striped wings from spur to spur, as though he were keeping close to the long swells of an unseen sea. Several times, a pert flicker squatting like a knot to a dead limb or the crimson plume of a cock of the woods, as plain as a splash of blood on a wall of vivid green, tempted him to let loose his last load, but he withstood them. A little later, he saw a fresh bear-track near a spring below the head of a ravine; and, later still, he heard the far-away barking of a hound and a deer leaped lightly into an open sunny spot and stood with uplifted hoof and pointed ears. This was too much and the boy's gun followed his heart to his throat, but the buck sprang lightly into the bush and vanished noiselessly.

The sun had dropped midway between the zenith and the blue bulks rolling westward and, at the next gap, a broader path ran through it and down the mountain. This, Chad knew, led to a settlement and, with a last look of choking farewell to his own world, he turned down. At once, the sense of possible human companionship was curiously potent: at once, the boy's half-wild manner changed and, though alert and still watchful, he whistled cheerily to Jack, threw his gun over his shoulder, and walked erect and confident. His pace slackened. Carelessly now his feet tramped beds of soft exquisite moss and lone little

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

settlements of forget-me-nots, and his long rifle-barrel brushed laurel blossoms down in a shower behind him. Once even, he picked up one of the pretty bells and looked idly at it, turning it bottom upward. The waxen cup might have blossomed from a tiny waxen star. There was a little green star for a calyx; above this, a little white star with its prongs outstretched—tiny arms to hold up the pink-flecked chalice for the rain and dew. There came a time when he thought of it as a star-blossom; but now his greedy tongue swept the honey from it and he dropped it without another thought to the ground. At the first spur down which the road turned, he could see smoke in the valley. The laurel blooms and rhododendron bells hung in thicker clusters and of a deeper pink. Here and there was a blossoming wild cucumber and an umbrella-tree with huger flowers and leaves; and, sometimes, a giant magnolia with a thick creamy flower that the boy could not have spanned with both hands and big, thin oval leaves, a man's stride from tip to stem. Soon, he was below the sunlight and in the cool shadows where the water ran noisily and the air hummed with the wings of bees. On the last spur, he came upon a cow browsing on sassafras-bushes right in the path and the last shadow of his loneliness straightway left him. She was old, mild, and unfearing, and she started down the road in front of him as though she thought he

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

had come to drive her home, or as though she knew he was homeless and was leading him to shelter. A little farther on, the river flashed up a welcome to him through the trees and at the edge of the water, her mellow bell led him down stream and he followed. In the next hollow, he stooped to drink from a branch that ran across the road and, when he rose to start again, his bare feet stopped as though riven suddenly to the ground; for, half way up the next low slope, was another figure as motionless as his—with a bare head, bare feet, a startled face and wide eyes—but motionless only until the eyes met his: then there was a flash of bright hair and scarlet homespun, and the little feet, that had trod down the centuries to meet his, left the earth as though they had wings and Chad saw them, in swift flight, pass silently over the hill. The next moment, Jack came too near the old brindle and, with a sweep of her horns at him and a toss of tail and heels in the air, she, too, swept over the slope and on, until the sound of her bell passed out of hearing. Even to-day, in lonely parts of the Cumberland, the sudden coming of a stranger may put women and children to flight—something like this had happened before to Chad—but the sudden desertion and the sudden silence drew him in a flash back to the lonely cabin he had left and the lonely graves under the big poplar and, with a quivering lip, he sat down. Jack, too,

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

dropped to his haunches and sat hopeless, but not for long. The chill of night was coming on and Jack was getting hungry. So he rose presently and trotted ahead and squatted again, looking back and waiting. But still Chad sat irresolute and, in a moment, Jack heard something that disturbed him, for he threw his ears toward the top of the hill and, with a growl, trotted back to Chad and sat close to him, looking up the slope. Chad rose then with his thumb on the lock of his gun and over the hill came a tall figure and a short one, about Chad's size; and a dog, with white feet and white face, that was bigger than Jack: and behind them, three more figures, one of which was the tallest of the group. All stopped when they saw Chad, who dropped the butt of his gun at once to the ground. At once the strange dog, with a low snarl, started down toward the two little strangers with his yellow ears pointed, the hair bristling along his back, and his teeth in sight. Jack answered the challenge with an eager whimper, but dropped his tail, at Chad's sharp command—for Chad did not care to meet the world as an enemy, when he was looking for a friend. The group stood dumb with astonishment for a moment and the small boy's mouth was wide-open with surprise, but the strange dog came on with his tail rigid, and lifting his feet high.

"Begone!" said Chad, sharply, but the dog

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

would not begone; he still came on as though bent on a fight.

"Call yo' dog off," Chad called aloud. "My dog'll kill him. You better call him off," he called again, in some concern, but the tall boy in front laughed scornfully.

"Let's see him," he said, and the small one laughed, too.

Chad's eyes flashed—no boy can stand an insult to his dog—and the curves of his open lips snapped together in a straight red line. "All right," he said, placidly, and, being tired, he dropped back on a stone by the wayside to await results. The very tone of his voice struck all shackles of restraint from Jack, who, with a springy trot, went forward slowly, as though he were making up a definite plan of action; for Jack had a fighting way of his own, which Chad knew.

"Sick him, Whizzer!" shouted the tall boy, and the group of five hurried eagerly down the hill and halted in a half circle about Jack and Chad: so that it looked an uneven conflict, indeed, for the two waifs from over Pine Mountain.

The strange dog was game and wasted no time. With a bound he caught Jack by the throat, tossed him several feet away, and sprang for him again. Jack seemed helpless against such strength and fury, but Chad's face was as placid as though it had been Jack who was playing the winning game.

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

Jack himself seemed little disturbed; he took his punishment without an outcry of rage or pain. You would have thought he had quietly come to the conclusion that all he could hope to do was to stand the strain until his opponent had worn himself out. But that was not Jack's game, and Chad knew it. The tall boy was chuckling, and his brother of Chad's age was bent almost double with delight.

"Kill my dawg, will he?" he cried, shrilly.

"Oh, Lawdy!" groaned the tall one.

Jack was much bitten and chewed by this time, and, while his pluck and purpose seemed unchanged, Chad had risen to his feet and was beginning to look anxious. The three silent spectators behind pressed forward and, for the first time, one of these—the tallest of the group—spoke:

"Take yo' dawg off, Daws Dillon," he said, with quiet authority; but Daws shook his head, and the little brother looked indignant.

"He said he'd kill him," said Daws, tauntingly.

"Yo' dawg's bigger and hit ain't fair," said the other again and, seeing Chad's worried look, he pressed suddenly forward; but Chad had begun to smile, and was sitting down on his stone again. Jack had leaped this time, with his first growl during the fight, and Whizzer gave a sharp cry of surprise and pain. Jack had caught him by the throat, close behind the jaws, and the big dog shook and

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

growled and shook again. Sometimes Jack was lifted quite from the ground, but he seemed clamped to his enemy to stay. Indeed he shut his eyes, finally, and seemed to go quite to sleep. The big dog threshed madly and swung and twisted, howling with increasing pain and terror and increasing weakness, while Jack's face was as peaceful as though he were a puppy once more and hanging to his mother's neck instead of her breast, asleep. By and by, Whizzer ceased to shake and began to pant; and, thereupon, Jack took his turn at shaking, gently at first, but with maddening regularity and without at all loosening his hold. The big dog was too weak to resist soon and, when Jack began to jerk savagely, Whizzer began to gasp.

"You take yo' dawg off," called Daws, sharply.

Chad never moved.

"Will you say 'nough for him?" he asked, quietly; and the tall one of the silent three laughed.

"Call him off, I tell ye," repeated Daws, savagely; but again Chad never moved, and Daws started for a club. Chad's new friend came forward.

"Hol' on, now, hol' on," he said, easily. "None o' that, I reckon."

Daws stopped with an oath. "Whut you got to do with this, Tom Turner?"

"You started this fight," said Tom.

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

"I don't keer ef I did—take him off," Daws answered, savagely.

"Will you say 'nough fer him?" said Chad again, and again Tall Tom chuckled. The little brother clinched his fists and turned white with fear for Whizzer and fury for Chad, while Daws looked at the tall Turner, shook his head from side to side, like a balking steer, and dropped his eyes:

"Y-e-s," he said, sullenly.

"Say it, then," said Chad, and this time Tall Tom roared aloud, and even his two silent brothers laughed. Again Daws, with a furious oath, started for the dogs with his club, but Chad's ally stepped between.

"You say 'nough, Daws Dillon," he said, and Daws looked into the quiet half-smiling face and at the stalwart two grinning behind.

"Takin' up agin yo' neighbors fer a wood-colt, air ye?"

"I'm a-takin' up fer what's right and fair. How do you know he's a wood-colt—an' suppose he is? You say 'nough now, or——"

Again Daws looked at the dogs. Jack had taken a fresh grip and was shaking savagely and steadily. Whizzer's tongue was out—once his throat rattled.

"'Nough!" growled Daws, angrily, and the word was hardly jerked from his lips before Chad was on his feet and prying Jack's jaws apart. "He ain't much hurt," he said, looking at the bloody

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

hold which Jack had clamped on his enemy's throat, "but he'd a-killed him though, he al'ays does. Thar ain't no chance fer *no* dog, when Jack gits *that* holt."

Then he raised his eyes and looked into the quivering face of the owner of the dog—the little fellow—who, with the bellow of a yearling bull, sprang at him. Again Chad's lips took a straight red line and being on one knee was an advantage, for, as he sprang up, he got both underholds and there was a mighty tussle, the spectators yelling with frantic delight.

"Trip him, Tad," shouted Daws, fiercely.

"Stick to him, little un," shouted Tom, and his brothers, stoical Dolph and Rube, danced about madly. Even with underholds, Chad, being much the shorter of the two, had no advantage that he did not need, and, with a sharp thud, the two fierce little bodies struck the road side by side, spurting up a cloud of dust.

"Dawg—fall!" cried Rube, and Dolph rushed forward to pull the combatants apart.

"He don't fight fair," said Chad, panting, and rubbing his right eye which his enemy had tried to "gouge;" "but lemme at him—I can fight that-away, too." Tall Tom held them apart.

"You're too little, and he don't fight fair. I reckon you better go on home—you two—an' yo' mean dawg," he said to Daws; and the two Dil-

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

lons—the one sullen and the other crying with rage—moved away with Whizzer slinking close to the ground after them. But at the top of the hill both turned with bantering yells, derisive wriggling of their fingers at their noses, and with other rude gestures. And, thereupon, Dolph and Rube wanted to go after them, but the tall brother stopped them with a word.

"That's about all they're fit fer," he said, contemptuously, and he turned to Chad.

"Whar you from, little man, an' whar you goin', an' what mought yo' name be?"

Chad told his name, and where he was from, and stopped.

"Whar you goin'?" said Tom again, without a word or look of comment.

Chad knew the disgrace and the suspicion that his answer was likely to generate, but he looked his questioner in the face fearlessly.

"I don't know whar I'm goin'."

The big fellow looked at him keenly, but kindly.

"You ain't lyin' an' I reckon you better come with us." He turned for the first time to his brothers and the two nodded.

"You an' yo' dawg, though Mammy don't like dawgs much; but you air a stranger an' you ain't afeerd, an' you can fight—you an' yo' dawg—an' I know Dad'll take ye both in."

So Chad and Jack followed the long strides of

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

the three Turners over the hill and to the bend of the river, where were three long cane fishing-poles with their butts stuck in the mud—the brothers had been fishing, when the flying figure of the little girl told them of the coming of a stranger into those lonely wilds. Taking these up, they strode on—Chad after them and Jack trotting, in cheerful confidence, behind. It is probable that Jack noticed, as soon as Chad, the swirl of smoke rising from a broad ravine that spread into broad fields, skirted by the great sweep of the river, for he sniffed the air sharply, and trotted suddenly ahead. It was a cheering sight for Chad. Two negro slaves were coming from work in a corn-field close by, and Jack's hair rose when he saw them, and, with a growl, he slunk behind his master. Dazed, Chad looked at them.

"Whut've them fellers got on their faces?" he asked. Tom laughed.

"Hain't you nuver seed a nigger afore?" he asked.

Chad shook his head.

"Lots o' folks from yo' side o' the mountains nuver have seed a nigger," said Tom. "Sometimes hit skeers 'em."

"Hit don't skeer me," said Chad.

At the gate of the barn-yard, in which was a long stable with a deeply sloping roof, stood the old brindle cow, who turned to look at Jack, and,

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

as Chad followed the three brothers through the yard gate, he saw a slim scarlet figure vanish swiftly from the porch into the house.

In a few minutes, Chad was inside the big log-cabin and before a big log-fire, with Jack between his knees and turning his soft human eyes keenly from one to another of the group about his little master, telling how the mountain cholera had carried off the man and the woman who had been father and mother to him, and their children; at which the old mother nodded her head in growing sympathy, for there were two fresh mounds in her own graveyard on the point of a low hill not far away; how old Nathan Cherry, whom he hated, had wanted to bind him out, and how, rather than have Jack mistreated and himself be ill-used, he had run away along the mountain-top; how he had slept one night under a log with Jack to keep him warm; how he had eaten sassafras and birch bark and had gotten drink from the green water-bulbs of the wild honeysuckle; and how, on the second day, being hungry, and without powder for his gun, he had started, when the sun sank, for the shadows of the valley at the mouth of Kingdom Come. Before he was done, the old mother knocked the ashes from her clay pipe and quietly went into the kitchen, and Jack, for all his good manners, could not restrain a whine of eagerness when he heard the crackle of bacon in a frying-pan and the delicious

THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME

smell of it struck his quivering nostrils. After dark, old Joel, the father of the house, came in—a giant in size and a mighty hunter—and he slapped his big thighs and roared until the rafters seemed to shake when Tall Tom told him about the dog-fight and the boy-fight with the family in the next cove: for already the clanship was forming that was to add the last horror to the coming great war and prolong that horror for nearly half a century after its close.

By and by, the scarlet figure of little Melissa came shyly out of the dark shadows behind and drew shyly closer and closer, until she was crouched in the chimney corner with her face shaded from the fire by one hand and a tangle of yellow hair, listening and watching him with her big, solemn eyes, quite fearlessly. Already the house was full of children and dependents, but no word passed between old Joel and the old mother, for no word was necessary. Two waifs who had so suffered and who could so fight could have a home under that roof if they pleased, forever. And Chad's sturdy little body lay deep in a feather-bed, and the friendly shadows from a big fire-place flickered hardly thrice over him before he was asleep. And Jack, for that night at least, was allowed to curl up by the covered coals, or stretch out his tired feet, if he pleased, to a warmth that in all the nights of his life, perhaps, he had never known before.

III

A "BLAB SCHOOL" ON KINGDOM COME

CHAD was awakened by the touch of a cold nose at his ear, the rasp of a warm tongue across his face, and the tug of two paws at his cover. "Git down, Jack!" he said, and Jack, with a whimper of satisfaction, went back to the fire that was roaring up the chimney, and a deep voice laughed and called:

"I reckon you better git *up*, little man!"

Old Joel was seated at the fire with his huge legs crossed and a pipe in his mouth. It was before dawn, but the household was busily astir. There was the sound of tramping in the frosty air outside and the noise of getting breakfast ready in the kitchen. As Chad sprang up, he saw Melissa's yellow hair drop out of sight behind the foot of the bed in the next corner, and he turned his face quickly, and, slipping behind the foot of his own bed and into his coat and trousers, was soon at the fire himself, with old Joel looking him over with shrewd kindness.

"Yo' dawg's got a heap o' sense," said the old hunter, and Chad told him how old Jack was, and