

VII

A FRIEND ON THE ROAD

RAIN fell that night—gentle rain and warm, for the south wind rose at midnight. At four o'clock a shower made the shingles over Chad rattle sharply, but without wakening the lad, and then the rain ceased; and when Chad climbed stiffly from his loft—the world was drenched and still, and the dawn was warm, for spring had come that morning, and Chad trudged along the road—unchilled. Every now and then he had to stop to rest his foot. Now and then he would see people getting breakfast ready in the farm-houses that he passed, and, though his little belly was drawn with pain, he would not stop and ask for something to eat—for he did not want to risk another rebuff. The sun rose and the light leaped from every wet blade of grass and bursting leaf to meet it—leaped as though flashing back gladness that the spring was come. For a little while Chad forgot his hunger and forgot his foot—like the leaf and grass-blade his stout heart answered with gladness, too, and he trudged on.

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Meanwhile, far behind him, an old carriage rolled out of a big yard and started toward him and toward Lexington. In the driver's seat was an old gray-haired, gray-bearded negro with knotty hands and a kindly face; while, on the oval-shaped seat behind the lumbering old vehicle, sat a little darky with his bare legs dangling down. In the carriage sat a man who might have been a stout squire straight from merry England, except that there was a little tilt to the brim of his slouch hat that one never sees except on the head of a Southerner, and in his strong, but easy, good-natured mouth was a pipe of corn-cob with a long cane stem. The horses that drew him were a handsome pair of half thorough-breds, and the old driver, with his eyes half closed, looked as though, even that early in the morning, he were dozing.

An hour later, the pike ran through an old wooden-covered bridge, to one side of which a road led down to the water, and the old negro turned the carriage to the creek to let his horses drink. The carriage stood still in the middle of the stream and presently the old driver turned his head:

"Mars Call!" he called in a low voice. The Major raised his head. The old negro was pointing with his whip ahead and the Major saw something sitting on the stone fence, some twenty yards beyond, which stirred him sharply from his mood of contemplation.

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"Shades of Dan'l Boone!" he said softly. It was a miniature pioneer—the little still figure watching him solemnly and silently. Across the boy's lap lay a long rifle—the Major could see that it had a flintlock—and on his tangled hair was a coonskin cap—the scalp above his steady dark eyes and the tail hanging down the lad's neck. And on his feet were—moccasins! The carriage moved out of the stream and the old driver got down to hook the check-reins over the shining bit of metal that curved back over the little saddles to which the boy's eyes had swiftly strayed. Then they came back to the Major.

"Howdye!" said Chad.

"Good-mornin', little man," said the Major pleasantly, and Chad knew straightway that he had found a friend. But there was silence. Chad scanned the horses and the strange vehicle and the old driver and the little pickaninny who, hearing the boy's voice, had stood up on his seat and was grinning over one of the hind wheels, and then his eyes rested on the Major with a simple confidence and unconscious appeal that touched the Major at once.

"Are you goin' my way?" The Major's nature was too mellow and easy-going to pay any attention to final g's. Chad lifted his old gun and pointed up the road.

"I'm a-goin' thataway."

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"Well, don't you want to ride?"

"Yes," he said, simply.

"Climb right in, my boy."

So Chad climbed in, and, holding the old rifle upright between his knees, he looked straight forward, in silence, while the Major studied him with a quiet smile.

"Where are you from, little man?"

"I come from the mountains."

"The mountains?" said the Major.

The Major had fished and hunted in the mountains, and somewhere in that unknown region he owned a kingdom of wild mountain-land, but he knew as little about the people as he knew about the Hottentots, and cared hardly more.

"What are you doin' up here?"

"I'm goin' home," said Chad.

"How did you happen to come away?"

"Oh, I been wantin' to see the settlemint's."

"The settlemint's," echoed the Major, and then he understood. He recalled having heard the mountaineers call the Bluegrass region the "settle-mints" before.

"I come down on a raft with Dolph and Tom and Rube and the Squire and the school-teacher, an' I got lost in Frankfort. They've gone on, I reckon, an' I'm tryin' to ketch 'em."

"What will you do if you don't?"

"Foller 'em," said Chad, sturdily.

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"Does your father live down in the mountains?"

"No," said Chad, shortly.

The Major looked at the lad gravely.

"Don't little boys down in the mountains ever say 'sir' to their elders?"

"No," said Chad. "No, sir," he added gravely, and the Major broke into a pleased laugh—the boy was quick as lightning.

"I ain't got no daddy. An' no mammy—I ain't got—nothin'." It was said quite simply, as though his purpose merely was not to sail under false colors, and the Major's answer was quick and apologetic:

"Oh!" he said, and for a moment there was silence again. Chad watched the woods, the fields, and the cattle, the strange grain growing about him, and the birds and the trees. Not a thing escaped his keen eye, and, now and then, he would ask a question which the Major would answer with some surprise and wonder. His artless ways pleased the old fellow.

"You haven't told me your name."

"You hain't axed me."

"Well, I axe you now," laughed the Major, but Chad saw nothing to laugh at.

"Chad," he said.

"Chad what?"

Now it had always been enough in the mountains when anybody asked his name, for him to an-

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swer simply—Chad. He hesitated now and his brow wrinkled as though he were thinking hard.

"I don't know," said Chad.

"What? Don't know your own name?" The boy looked up into the Major's face with eyes that were so frank and unashamed and at the same time so vaguely troubled that the Major was abashed.

"Of course not," he said kindly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world that a boy should not know his own name. Presently the Major said, reflectively:

"Chadwick."

"Chad," corrected the boy.

"Yes, I know;" and the Major went on thinking that Chadwick happened to be an ancestral name in his own family.

Chad's brow was still wrinkled—he was trying to think what old Nathan Cherry used to call him.

"I reckon I hain't thought o' my name since I left old Nathan," he said. Then he told briefly about the old man, and lifting his lame foot suddenly, he said: "Ouch!" The Major looked around and Chad explained:

"I hurt my foot comin' down the river an' hit got wuss walkin' so much." The Major noticed then that the boy's face was pale, and that there were dark hollows under his eyes, but it never occurred to him that the lad was hungry, for, in the Major's land, nobody ever went hungry for

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long. But Chad was suffering now and he leaned back in his seat and neither talked nor looked at the passing fields. By and by, he spied a cross-roads store.

"I wonder if I can't git somethin' to eat in that store."

The Major laughed: "You ain't gettin' hungry so soon, are you? You must have eaten breakfast pretty early."

"I ain't had no breakfast—an' I didn't hev no supper last night."

"What?" shouted the Major.

Chad stated the fact with brave unconcern, but his lip quivered slightly—he was weak.

"Well, I reckon we'll get something to eat there, whether they've got anything or not."

And then Chad explained, telling the story of his walk from Frankfort. The Major was amazed that anybody could have denied the boy food and lodging.

"Who were they, Tom?" he asked.

The old driver turned:

"They wus some po' white trash down on Cane Creek, I reckon, suh. Must 'a' been." There was a slight contempt in the negro's words that made Chad think of hearing the Turners call the Dillons white trash—though they never said "po' white trash."

"Oh!" said the Major. So the carriage stopped,

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and when a man in a black slouch hat came out, the Major called:

"Jim, here's a boy who ain't had anything to eat for twenty-four hours. Get him a cup of coffee right away, and I reckon you've got some cold ham handy."

"Yes, indeed, Major," said Jim, and he yelled to a negro girl who was standing on the porch of his house behind the store.

Chad ate ravenously and the Major watched him with genuine pleasure. When the boy was through, he reached in his pocket and brought out his old five-dollar bill, and the Major laughed aloud and patted him on the head.

"You can't pay for anything while you are with me, Chad."

The whole earth wore a smile when they started out again. The swelling hills had stretched out into gentler slopes. The sun was warm, the clouds were still, and the air was almost drowsy. The Major's eyes closed and everything lapsed into silence. That was a wonderful ride for Chad. It was all true, just as the school-master had told him; the big, beautiful houses he saw now and then up avenues of blossoming locusts; the endless stone fences, the whitewashed barns, the woodlands and pastures; the meadow-larks flitting in the sunlight and singing everywhere; fluting, chattering black-birds, and a strange new black bird with red wings,

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at which Chad wondered very much, as he watched it balancing itself against the wind and singing as it poised. Everything seemed to sing in that wonderful land. And the seas of bluegrass stretching away on every side, with the shadows of clouds passing in rapid succession over them, like mystic floating islands—and never a mountain in sight. What a strange country it was.

"Maybe some of your friends are looking for you in Frankfort," said the Major.

"No, sir, I reckon not," said Chad—for the man at the station had told him that the men who had asked about him were gone.

"All of them?" asked the Major.

Of course, the man at the station could not tell whether all of them had gone, and perhaps the school-master had stayed behind—it was Caleb Hazel if anybody.

"Well, now, I wonder," said Chad—"the school-teacher might 'a' stayed."

Again the two lapsed into silence—Chad thinking very hard. He might yet catch the school-master in Lexington, and he grew very cheerful at the thought.

"You ain't told me yo' name," he said, presently. The Major's lips smiled under the brim of his hat.

"You hain't axed me."

"Well, I axe you now." Chad, too, was smiling.

"Cal," said the Major.

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"Cal what?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, yes, you do, now—you foolin' me"—the boy lifted one finger at the Major.

"Buford—Calvin Buford."

"Buford—Buford—Buford," repeated the boy, each time with his forehead wrinkled as though he were trying to recall something.

"What is it, Chad?"

"Nothin'—nothin'."

And then he looked up with bewildered face at the Major and broke into the quavering voice of an old man.

"Chad Buford, you little devil, come hych this minute or I'll beat the life outen you!"

"What—what!" said the Major excitedly. The boy's face was as honest as the sky above him. "Well, that's funny—very funny."

"Well, that's it," said Chad, "that's what ole Nathan used to call me. I reckon I hain't nuver thought o' my name agin tell you axed me." The Major looked at the lad keenly and then dropped back in his seat ruminating.

Away back in 1778 a linchpin had slipped in a wagon on the Wilderness Road and his grandfather's only brother, Chadwick Buford, had concluded to stop there for a while and hunt and come on later—thus ran an old letter that the Major had in his strong box at home—and that brother

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had never turned up again and the supposition was that he had been killed by Indians. Now it would be strange if he had wandered up in the mountains and settled there and if this boy were a descendant of his. It would be very, very strange, and then the Major almost laughed at the absurdity of the idea. The name Buford was all over the State. The boy had said, with amazing frankness and without a particle of shame, that he was a waif—a "woodscolt," he said, with paralyzing candor. And so the Major dropped the matter out of his mind, except in so far that it was a peculiar coincidence—again saying, half to himself:

"It certainly is very odd."

VIII

HOME WITH THE MAJOR

A HEAD of them, it was Court Day in Lexington. From the town, as a centre, white turnpikes radiated in every direction like the strands of a spider's web. Along them, on the day before, cattle, sheep, and hogs had made their slow way. Since dawn, that morning, the fine dust had been rising under hoof and wheel on every one of them, for Court Day is yet the great day of every month throughout the Bluegrass. The crowd had gone ahead of the Major and Chad. Only now and then would a laggard buggy or carriage turn into the pike from a pasture-road or locust-bordered avenue. Only men were occupants, for the ladies rarely go to town on court days—and probably none would go on that day. Trouble was expected. An abolitionist, one Brutus Dean—not from the North, but a Kentuckian, a slave-holder and a gentleman—would probably start a paper in Lexington to exploit his views in the heart of the Bluegrass; and his quondam friends would shatter his press and tear his office to pieces. So the Major told Chad, and he pointed out some "hands" at work in a field.