
JOHN JR.
FOX
THE LITTLE SHEPHERD OF KINGDOM COME


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CHAPTER 1

TWO RUNAWAYS FROM LONESOME

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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 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 stumbling 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 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.

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 discrimination 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 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 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 never 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—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 jes' 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 hyah—with me a-keerint 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 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.

CHAPTER 2

FIGHTING THEIR WAY

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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 prescience 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 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 snowdust, 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 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 mistdrops 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. Afar 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 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 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.

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 whir rose a few feet to one side of the

path 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 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 settlements of forget-me-nots, and his long riflebarrel 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 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, 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 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.

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 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.

"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 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 hold."

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 thataway, 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 Dillons—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 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, 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 back 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 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