JOHN
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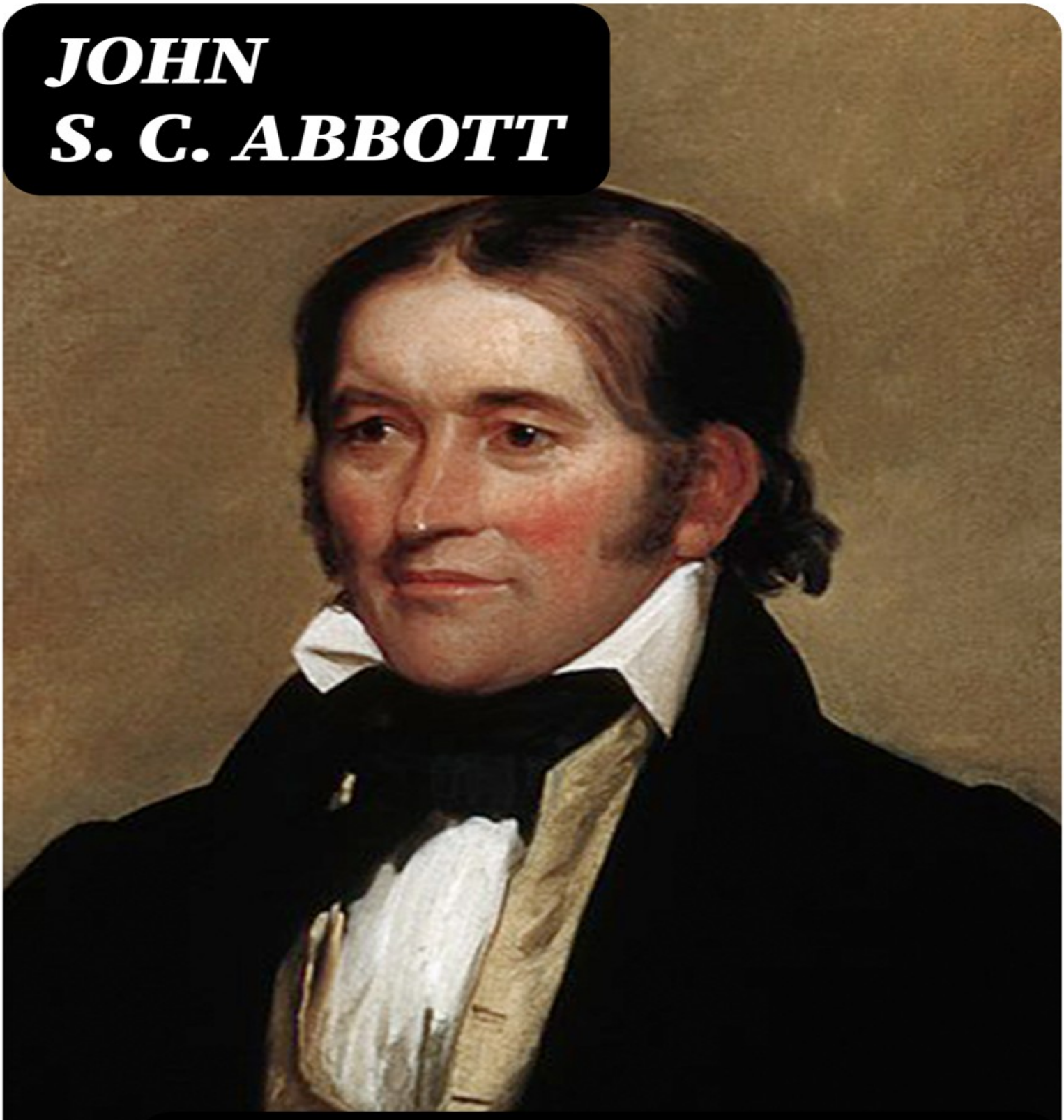

DAVID CROCKETT: HIS LIFE AND ADVENTURES

John S. C. Abbott

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PREFACE.

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David Crockett certainly was not a model man. But he was a representative man. He was conspicuously one of a very numerous class, still existing, and which has heretofore exerted a very powerful influence over this republic. As such, his wild and wondrous life is worthy of the study of every patriot. Of this class, their modes of life and habits of thought, the majority of our citizens know as little as they do of the manners and customs of the Comanche Indians.

No man can make his name known to the forty millions of this great and busy republic who has not something very remarkable in his character or his career. But there is probably not an adult American, in all these widespread States, who has not heard of David Crockett. His life is a veritable romance, with the additional charm of unquestionable truth. It opens to the reader scenes in the lives of the lowly, and a state of semi-civilization, of which but few of them can have the faintest idea.

It has not been my object, in this narrative, to defend Colonel Crockett or to condemn him, but to present his peculiar character exactly as it was. I have therefore been

constrained to insert some things which I would gladly have omitted.

JOHN S. C. ABBOTT.

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CHAPTER I.

Parentage and Childhood.

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The Emigrant.—Crossing the Alleghanies.—The boundless Wilderness.—The Hut on the Holston.—Life's Necessaries.—The Massacre.—Birth of David Crockett.—Peril of the Boys.—Anecdote.—Removal to Greenville; to Cove Creek.—Increased Emigration.—Loss of the Mill.—The Tavern.—Engagement with the Drover.—Adventures in the Wilderness.—Virtual Captivity.—The Escape.—The Return.—The Runaway.—New Adventures.

A little more than a hundred years ago, a poor man, by the name of Crockett, embarked on board an emigrant-ship, in Ireland, for the New World. He was in the humblest station in life. But very little is known respecting his uneventful career excepting its tragical close. His family consisted of a wife and three or four children. Just before he sailed, or on the Atlantic passage, a son was born, to whom he gave the name of John. The family probably landed in Philadelphia, and dwelt somewhere in Pennsylvania, for a year or two, in one of those slab shanties, with which all are familiar as the abodes of the poorest class of Irish emigrants.

After a year or two, Crockett, with his little family, crossed the almost pathless Alleghanies. Father, mother, and children trudged along through the rugged defiles and over the rocky cliffs, on foot. Probably a single pack-horse conveyed their few household goods. The hatchet and the

rifle were the only means of obtaining food, shelter, and even clothing. With the hatchet, in an hour or two, a comfortable camp could be constructed, which would protect them from wind and rain. The camp-fire, cheering the darkness of the night, drying their often wet garments, and warming their chilled limbs with its genial glow, enabled them to enjoy that almost greatest of earthly luxuries, peaceful sleep.

The rifle supplied them with food. The fattest of turkeys and the most tender steaks of venison, roasted upon forked sticks, which they held in their hands over the coals, feasted their voracious appetites. This, to them, was almost sumptuous food. The skin of the deer, by a rapid and simple process of tanning, supplied them with moccasons, and afforded material for the repair of their tattered garments.

We can scarcely comprehend the motive which led this solitary family to push on, league after league, farther and farther from civilization, through the trackless forests. At length they reached the Holston River. This stream takes its rise among the western ravines of the Alleghanies, in Southwestern Virginia. Flowing hundreds of miles through one of the most solitary and romantic regions upon the globe, it finally unites with the Clinch River, thus forming the majestic Tennessee.

One hundred years ago, this whole region, west of the Alleghanies, was an unexplored and an unknown wilderness. Its silent rivers, its forests, and its prairies were crowded with game. Countless Indian tribes, whose names even had never been heard east of the Alleghanies, ranged this vast

expanse, pursuing, in the chase, wild beasts scarcely more savage than themselves.

The origin of these Indian tribes and their past history are lost in oblivion. Centuries have come and gone, during which joys and griefs, of which we now can know nothing, visited their humble lodges. Providence seems to have raised up a peculiar class of men, among the descendants of the emigrants from the Old World, who, weary of the restraints of civilization, were ever ready to plunge into the wildest depths of the wilderness, and to rear their lonely huts in the midst of all its perils, privations, and hardships.

This solitary family of the Crocketts followed down the northwestern banks of the Hawkins River for many a weary mile, until they came to a spot which struck their fancy as a suitable place to build their Cabin. In subsequent years a small village called Rogersville was gradually reared upon this spot, and the territory immediately around was organized into what is now known as Hawkins County. But then, for leagues in every direction, the solemn forest stood in all its grandeur. Here Mr. Crockett, alone and unaided save by his wife and children, constructed a little shanty, which could have been but little more than a hunter's camp. He could not lift solid logs to build a substantial house. The hard-trodden ground was the only floor of the single room which he enclosed. It was roofed with bark of trees piled heavily on, which afforded quite effectual protection from the rain. A hole cut through the slender logs was the only window. A fire was built in one corner, and the smoke eddied through a hole left in the roof. The skins of bears, buffaloes, and wolves provided couches, all sufficient for weary ones,

who needed no artificial opiate to promote sleep. Such, in general, were the primitive homes of many of those bold emigrants who abandoned the comforts of civilized life for the solitudes of the wilderness.

They did not want for most of what are called the necessaries of life. The river and the forest furnished a great variety of fish and game. Their hut, humble as it was, effectually protected them from the deluging tempest and the inclement cold. The climate was genial in a very high degree, and the soil, in its wonderful fertility, abundantly supplied them with corn and other simple vegetables. But the silence and solitude which reigned are represented, by those who experienced them, as at times something dreadful.

One principal motive which led these people to cross the mountains, was the prospect of an ultimate fortune in the rise of land. Every man who built a cabin and raised a crop of grain, however small, was entitled to four hundred acres of land, and a preemption right to one thousand more adjoining, to be secured by a land-office warrant.

In this lonely home, Mr. Crockett, with his wife and children, dwelt for some months, perhaps years—we know not how long. One night, the awful yell of the savage was heard, and a band of human demons came rushing upon the defenceless family. Imagination cannot paint the tragedy which ensued. Though this lost world, ever since the fall of Adam, has been filled to repletion with these scenes of woe, it causes one's blood to curdle in his veins as he contemplates this one deed of cruelty and blood.

The howling fiends were expeditious in their work. The father and mother were pierced by arrows, mangled with the tomahawk, and scalped. One son, severely wounded, escaped into the forest. Another little boy, who was deaf and dumb, was taken captive and carried by the Indians to their distant tribe, where he remained, adopted into the tribe, for about eighteen years. He was then discovered by some of his relatives, and was purchased back at a considerable ransom. The torch was applied to the cabin, and the bodies of the dead were consumed in the crackling flames.

What became of the remainder of the children, if there were any others present in this midnight scene of conflagration and blood, we know not. There was no reporter to give us the details. We simply know that in some way John Crockett, who subsequently became the father of that David whose history we now write, was not involved in the general massacre. It is probable that he was not then with the family, but that he was a hired boy of all work in some farmer's family in Pennsylvania.

As a day-laborer he grew up to manhood, and married a woman in his own sphere of life, by the name of Mary Hawkins. He enlisted as a common soldier in the Revolutionary War, and took part in the battle of King's Mountain. At the close of the war he reared a humble cabin in the frontier wilds of North Carolina. There he lived for a few years, at but one remove, in point of civilization, from the savages around him. It is not probable that either he or his wife could read or write. It is not probable that they had any religious thoughts; that their minds ever wandered into

the regions of that mysterious immortality which reaches out beyond the grave. Theirs was apparently purely an animal existence, like that of the Indian, almost like that of the wild animals they pursued in the chase.

At length, John Crockett, with his wife and three or four children, unintimidated by the awful fate of his father's family, wandered from North Carolina, through the long and dreary defiles of the mountains, to the sunny valleys and the transparent skies of East Tennessee. It was about the year 1783. Here he came to a rivulet of crystal water, winding through majestic forests and plains of luxuriant verdure. Upon a green mound, with this stream flowing near his door, John Crockett built his rude and floorless hut. Punching holes in the soil with a stick, he dropped in kernels of corn, and obtained a far richer harvest than it would be supposed such culture could produce. As we have mentioned, the building of this hut and the planting of this crop made poor John Crockett the proprietor of four hundred acres of land of almost inexhaustible fertility.

In this lonely cabin, far away in the wilderness, David Crockett was born, on the 17th of August, 1786. He had then four brothers. Subsequently four other children were added to the family.

His childhood's home was more humble than the majority of the readers of this volume can imagine. It was destitute of everything which, in a higher state of civilization, is deemed essential to comfort. The wigwam of the Indian afforded as much protection from the weather, and was as well furnished, as the cabin of logs and bark which sheltered his father's family. It would seem, from David Crockett's

autobiography, that in his childhood he went mainly without any clothing, like the pappooses of an Indian squaw. These facts of his early life must be known, that we may understand the circumstances by which his peculiar character was formed.

He had no instruction whatever in religion, morals, manners, or mental culture. It cannot be supposed that his illiterate parents were very gentle in their domestic discipline, or that their example could have been of any essential advantage in preparing him for the arduous struggle of life. It would be difficult to find any human being, in a civilized land, who can have enjoyed less opportunities for moral culture than David Crockett enjoyed in his early years.

There was quite a fall on the Nolachucky River, a little below the cabin of John Crockett. Here the water rushed foaming over the rocks, with fury which would at once swamp any canoe. When David was four or five years old, and several other emigrants had come and reared their cabins in that vicinity, he was one morning out playing with his brothers on the bank of the river. There was a canoe tied to the shore. The boys got into it, and, to amuse themselves, pushed out into the stream, leaving little David, greatly to his indignation, on the shore.

But the boys did not know how to manage the canoe, and though they plied the paddies with all vigor, they soon found themselves caught in the current, and floating rapidly down toward the falls, where, should they be swept over, the death of all was inevitable.

A man chanced to be working in a field not far distant. He heard the cries of the boys and saw their danger. There was not a moment to be lost. He started upon the full run, throwing off coat and waistcoat and shoes, in his almost frantic speed, till he reached the water. He then plunged in, and, by swimming and wading, seized the canoe when it was within but about twenty feet of the roaring falls. With almost superhuman exertions he succeeded in dragging it to the shore.

This event David Crockett has mentioned as the first which left any lasting imprint upon his memory. Not long after this, another occurrence took place characteristic of frontier life. Joseph Hawkins, a brother of David's mother, crossed the mountains and joined the Crockett family in their forest home. One morning he went out to shoot a deer, repairing to a portion of the forest much frequented by this animal. As he passed a very dense thicket, he saw the boughs swaying to and fro, where a deer was apparently browsing. Very cautiously he crept within rifle-shot, occasionally catching a glimpse, through the thick foliage, of the ear of the animal,—as he supposed.

Taking deliberate aim he fired, and immediately heard a loud outcry. Rushing to the spot, he found that he had shot a neighbor, who was there gathering grapes. The ball passed through his side, inflicting a very serious though not a fatal wound, as it chanced not to strike any vital part. The wounded man was carried home; and the rude surgery which was practised upon him was to insert a silk handkerchief with a ramrod in at the bullet-hole, and draw it through his body. He recovered from the wound.

Such a man as John Crockett forms no local attachments, and never remains long in one place. Probably some one came to his region and offered him a few dollars for his improvements. He abandoned his cabin, with its growing neighborhood, and packing his few household goods upon one or two horses, pushed back fifty miles farther southwest, into the trackless wilderness. Here he found, about ten miles above the present site of Greenville, a fertile and beautiful region. Upon the banks of a little brook, which furnished him with an abundant supply of pure water, he reared another shanty, and took possession of another four hundred acres of forest land. Some of his boys were now old enough to furnish efficient help in the field and in the chase.

How long John Crockett remained here we know not. Neither do we know what induced him to make another move. But we soon find him pushing still farther back into the wilderness, with his hapless family of sons and daughters, dooming them, in all their ignorance, to the society only of bears and wolves. He now established himself upon a considerable stream, unknown to geography, called Cue Creek.

David Crockett was now about eight years old. During these years emigration had been rapidly flowing from the Atlantic States into this vast and beautiful valley south of the Ohio. With the increasing emigration came an increasing demand for the comforts of civilization. Framed houses began to rise here and there, and lumber, in its various forms, was needed.

John Crockett, with another man by the name of Thomas Galbraith, undertook to build a mill upon Cove Creek. They had nearly completed it, having expended all their slender means in its construction, when there came a terrible freshet, and all their works were swept away. The flood even inundated Crockett's cabin, and the family was compelled to fly to a neighboring eminence for safety.

Disheartened by this calamity, John Crockett made another move. Knoxville, on the Holston River, had by this time become quite a thriving little settlement of log huts. The main route of emigration was across the mountains to Abingdon, in Southwestern Virginia, and then by an extremely rough forest-road across the country to the valley of the Holston, and down that valley to Knoxville. This route was mainly traversed by pack-horses and emigrants on foot. But stout wagons, with great labor, could be driven through.

John Crockett moved still westward to this Holston valley, where he reared a pretty large log house on this forest road; and opened what he called a tavern for the entertainment of teamsters and other emigrants. It was indeed a rude resting-place. But in a fierce storm the exhausted animals could find a partial shelter beneath a shed of logs, with corn to eat; and the hardy pioneers could sleep on bear-skins, with their feet perhaps soaked with rain, feeling the warmth of the cabin fire. The rifle of John Crockett supplied his guests with the choicest venison steaks, and his wife baked in the ashes the "journey cake," since called johnny cake, made of meal from corn pounded in a mortar or ground in a hand-mill. The brilliant flame of the pitch-pine knot illumined the cabin; and around the fire these hardy men often kept

wakeful until midnight, smoking their pipes, telling their stories, and singing their songs.

This house stood alone in the forest. Often the silence of the night was disturbed by the cry of the grizzly bear and the howling of wolves. Here David remained four years, aiding his father in all the laborious work of clearing the land and tending the cattle. There was of course no school here, and the boy grew up in entire ignorance of all book learning. But in these early years he often went into the woods with his gun in pursuit of game, and, young as he was, acquired considerable reputation as a marksman.

One day, a Dutchman by the name of Jacob Siler came to the cabin, driving a large herd of cattle. He had gathered them farther west, from the luxuriant pastures in the vicinity of Knoxville, where cattle multiplied with marvellous rapidity, and was taking them back to market in Virginia. The drover found some difficulty in managing so many half wild cattle, as he pressed them forward through the wilderness, and he bargained with John Crockett to let his son David, who, as we have said, was then twelve years of age, go with him as his hired help. Whatever wages he gave was paid to the father.

The boy was to go on foot with this Dutchman four hundred miles, driving the cattle. This transaction shows very clearly the hard and unfeeling character of David's parents. When he reached the end of his journey, so many weary leagues from home, the only way by which he could return was to attach himself to some emigrant party or some company of teamsters, and walk back, paying for such food as he might consume, by the assistance he could

render on the way. There are few parents who could thus have treated a child of twelve years.

The little fellow, whose affections had never been more cultivated than those of the whelp of the wolf or the cub of the bear, still left home, as he tells us, with a heavy heart. The Dutchman was an entire stranger to him, and he knew not what treatment he was to expect at his hands. He had already experienced enough of forest travel to know its hardships. A journey of four hundred miles seemed to him like going to the uttermost parts of the earth. As the pioneers had smoked their pipes at his father's cabin fire, he had heard many appalling accounts of bloody conflicts with the Indians, of massacres, scalpings, tortures, and captivity.

David's father had taught him, very sternly, one lesson, and that was implicit and prompt obedience to his demands. The boy knew full well that it would be of no avail for him to make any remonstrance. Silently, and trying to conceal his tears, he set out on the perilous enterprise. The cattle could be driven but about fifteen or twenty miles a day. Between twenty and thirty days were occupied in the toilsome and perilous journey. The route led them often through marshy ground, where the mire was trampled knee-deep. All the streams had to be forded. At times, swollen by the rains, they were very deep. There were frequent days of storm, when, through the long hours, the poor boy trudged onward, drenched with rain and shivering with cold. Their fare was most meagre, consisting almost entirely of such game as they chanced to shoot, which they roasted on forked sticks before the fire.

When night came, often dark and stormy, the cattle were generally too much fatigued by their long tramp to stray away. Some instinct also induced them to cluster together. A rude shanty was thrown up. Often everything was so soaked with rain that it was impossible to build a fire. The poor boy, weary and supperless, spattered with mud and drenched with rain, threw himself upon the wet ground for that blessed sleep in which the weary forget their woes. Happy was he if he could induce one of the shaggy dogs to lie down by his side, that he might hug the faithful animal in his arms, and thus obtain a little warmth.

Great was the luxury when, at the close of a toilsome day, a few pieces of bark could be so piled as to protect from wind and rain, and a roaring fire could blaze and crackle before the little camp. Then the appetite which hunger gives would enable him to feast upon the tender cuts of venison broiled upon the coals, with more satisfaction than the gourmand takes in the choicest viands of the restaurant. Having feasted to satiety, he would stretch himself upon the ground, with his feet to the fire, and soon be lost to all earth's cares, in sweet oblivion.

The journey was safely accomplished. The Dutchman had a father-in-law, by the name of Hartley, who lived in Virginia, having reared his cabin within about three miles of the Natural Bridge. Here the boy's contract came to an end. It would seem that the Dutchman was a good sort of man, as the world goes, and that he treated the boy kindly. He was so well pleased with David's energy and fidelity, that he was inclined to retain him in his service. Seeing the boy's anxiety to return home, he was disposed to throw around

him invisible chains, and to hold him a captive. He thus threw every possible hindrance in the way of his return, offered to hire him as his boy of all work, and made him a present of five or six dollars, which perhaps he considered payment in advance, which bound the boy to remain with him until he had worked it out.

David soon perceived that his movements were watched, and that he was not his own master to go or stay as he pleased. This increased his restlessness. Four or five weeks thus passed away, when, one morning, three wagons laden with merchandise came along, bound to Knoxville. They were driven by an old man by the name of Dugan, and his two stalwart sons. They had traversed the road before, and David had seen the old man at his father's tavern. Secretly the shrewd boy revealed to him his situation, and his desire to get back to his home. The father and sons conferred together upon the subject. They were moved with sympathy for the boy, and, after due deliberation, told him that they should stop for the night about seven miles from that place, and should set out again on their journey with the earliest light of the morning; and that if he could get to them before daylight, he might follow their wagons.

It was Sunday morning, and it so happened that the Dutchman and the family had gone away on a visit. David collected his clothes and the little money he had, and hid them in a bundle under his bed. A very small bundle held them all. The family returned, and, suspecting nothing, all retired to sleep.

David had naturally a very affectionate heart. He never had been from home before. His lonely situation roused all

the slumbering emotions of his childhood. In describing this event, he writes:

"I went to bed early that night, but sleep seemed to be a stranger to me. For though I was a wild boy, yet I dearly loved my father and mother; and their images appeared to be so deeply fixed in my mind that I could not sleep for thinking of them. And then the fear that when I should attempt to go out I should be discovered and called to a halt, filled me with anxiety."

A little after midnight, when the family were in profoundest sleep, David cautiously rose, and taking his little bundle, crept out doors. To his disappointment he found that it was snowing fast, eight inches having already fallen; and the wintry gale moaned dismally through the treetops. It was a dark, moonless night. The cabin was in the fields, half a mile from the road along which the wagons had passed. This boy of twelve years, alone in the darkness, was to breast the gale and wade through the snow, amid forest glooms, a distance of seven miles, before he could reach the appointed rendezvous.

For a moment his heart sank within him. Then recovering his resolution, he pushed out boldly into the storm. For three hours he toiled along, the snow rapidly increasing in depth until it reached up to his knees. Just before the dawn of the morning he reached the wagons. The men were up, harnessing their teams. The Dunns were astounded at the appearance of the little boy amid the darkness and the tempest. They took him into the house, warmed him by the fire, and gave him a good breakfast, speaking to him words of sympathy and encouragement. The affectionate heart of

David was deeply moved by this tenderness, to which he was quite unaccustomed.

And then, though exhausted by the toil of a three hours' wading through the drifts, he commenced, in the midst of a mountain storm, a long day's journey upon foot. It was as much as the horses could do to drag the heavily laden wagons over the encumbered road. However weary, he could not ride. However exhausted, the wagons could not wait for him; neither was there any place in the smothering snow for rest.

Day after day they toiled along, in the endurance of hardships now with difficulty comprehended. Sometimes they were gladdened with sunny skies and smooth paths. Again the clouds would gather, and the rain, the sleet, and the snow would envelop them in glooms truly dismal. Under these circumstances the progress of the wagons was very slow. David was impatient. As he watched the sluggish turns of the wheels, he thought that he could travel very much faster if he should push forward alone, leaving the wagons behind him.

At length he became so impatient, thoughts of home having obtained entire possession of his mind, that he informed Mr. Dunn of his intention to press forward as fast as he could. His elder companions deemed it very imprudent for such a mere child, thus alone, to attempt to traverse the wilderness, and they said all they could to dissuade him, but in vain. He therefore, early the next morning, bade them farewell, and with light footsteps and a light heart tripped forward, leaving them behind, and accomplishing nearly as much in one day as the wagons

could in two. We are not furnished with any of the details of this wonderful journey of a solitary child through a wilderness of one or two hundred miles. We know not how he slept at night, or how he obtained food by day. He informs us that he was at length overtaken by a drover, who had been to Virginia with a herd of cattle, and was returning to Knoxville riding one horse and leading another.

The man was amazed in meeting a mere child in such lonely wilds, and upon hearing his story, his kind heart was touched. David was a frail little fellow, whose weight would be no burden for a horse, and the good man directed him to mount the animal which he led. The boy had begun to be very tired. He was just approaching a turbid stream, whose icy waters, reaching almost to his neck, he would have had to wade but for this Providential assistance.

Travellers in the wilderness seldom trot their horses. On such a journey, an animal who naturally walks fast is of much more value than one which has attained high speed upon the race-course. Thus pleasantly mounted, David and his kind protector rode along together until they came within about fifteen miles of John Crockett's tavern, where their roads diverged. Here David dismounted, and bidding adieu to his benefactor, almost ran the remaining distance, reaching home that evening.

"The name of this kind gentleman," he writes, "I have forgotten; for it deserves a high place in my little book. A remembrance of his kindness to a little straggling boy has, however, a resting-place in my heart, and there it will remain as long as I live."