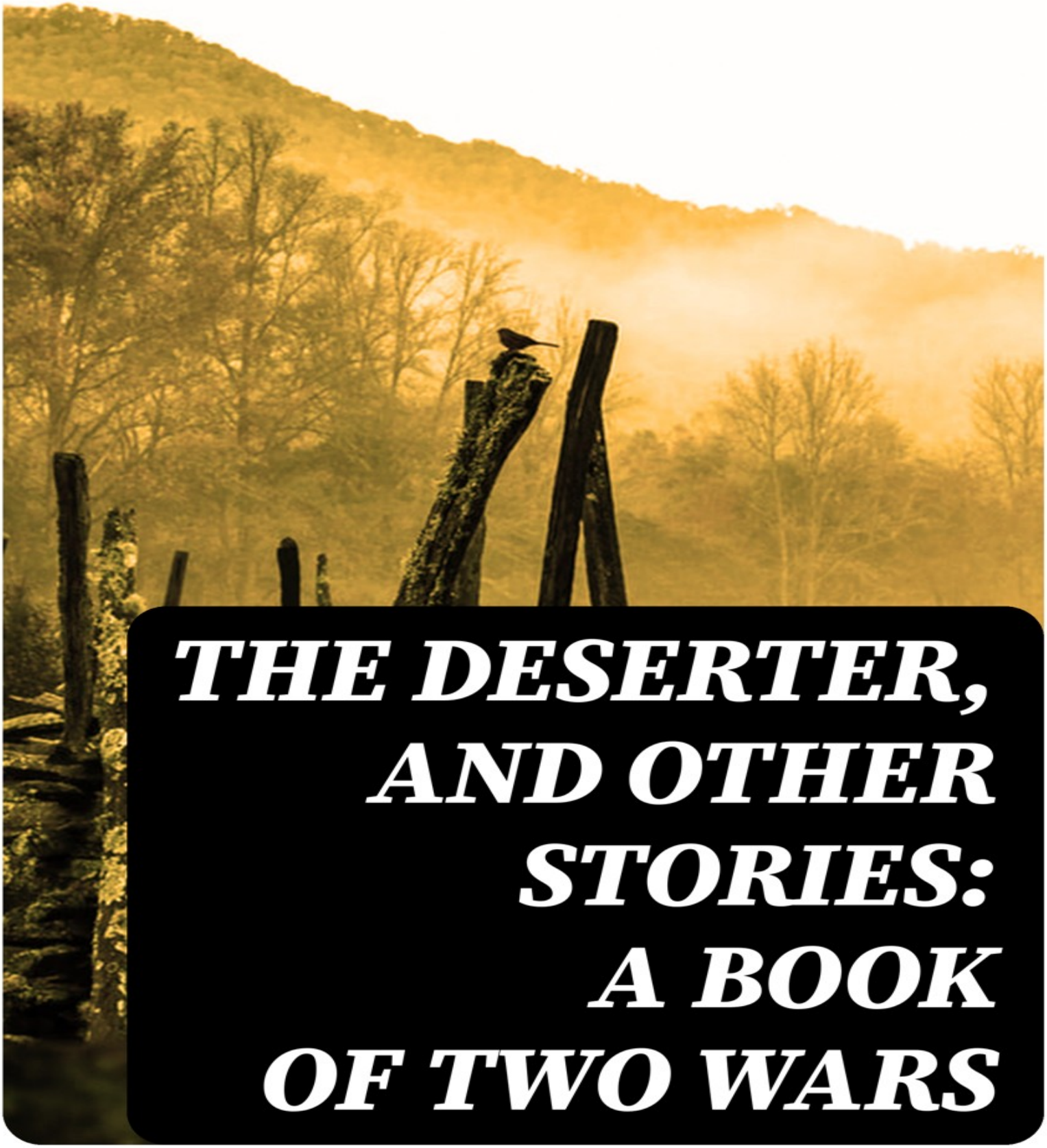
HAROLD FREDERIC



THE DESERTER, AND OTHER STORIES: A BOOK OF TWO WARS

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

DISCOVERIES IN THE BARN.

Table of Contents

It was the coldest morning of the winter, thus far, and winter is no joke on those northern tablelands, where the streams still run black in token of their forest origin, and old men remember how the deer used to be driven to their clearings for food, when the snow had piled itself breast high through the fastnesses of the Adirondacks. The wilderness had been chopped and burned backward out of sight since their pioneer days, but this change, if anything, served only to add greater bitterness to the winter's cold.

Certainly it seemed to Job Parshall that this was the coldest morning he had ever known. It would be bad enough when daylight came, but the darkness of this early hour made it almost too much for flesh and blood to bear. There had been a stray star or two visible overhead when he first came out-of-doors at half-past four, but even these were missing now.

The crusted snow in the barnyard did throw up a wee, faint light of its own, for all the blackness of the sky, but Job carried, besides a bucket, a lantern to help him in his impending struggle with the pump. This ancient contrivance had been ice-bound every morning for a fortnight past, and one needn't be the son of a prophet to foresee that this morning it would be frozen as stiff as a rock.

It did not turn out to be so prolonged or so fierce a conflict as he had apprehended. He had reasoned to himself

the previous day that if the pump-handle were propped upright with a stick overnight, there would be less water remaining in the cylinder to freeze, and had made the experiment just before bedtime.

It worked fairly well. There was only a good deal of ice to be knocked off the spout with a sledge-stake, and then a disheartening amount of dry pumping to be done before the welcome drag of suction made itself felt in the well below, like the bite of a big fish in deep water.

Job filled his bucket and trudged back with it to the cow-barn, stamping his feet for warmth as he went.

By comparison with the numbing air outside, this place was a dream of coziness. Two long lines of cows, a score or more on a side, faced each other in double rows of stanchions. Their mere presence had filled the enclosure with a steaming warmth.

The ends of the barn and the loft above were packed close with hay, moreover, and half a dozen lantern lights were gleaming for the hired men to see by, in addition to a reflector lamp fastened against a post.

The men did not mind the cold. They had been briskly at work cleaning up the stable and getting down hay and fodder, and the exercise kept their blood running and spirits light. They talked as they plied shovel and pitchfork, guessing how near the low-mercury mark of twenty below zero the temperature outside had really fallen, and chaffing one of their number who had started out to go through the winter without wearing an overcoat.

Their cheery voices, resounding through the half-gloom above the soft, crackling undertone of the kine munching

their breakfast seemed to add to the warmth of the barn.

The boy Job had begun setting about a task which had no element of comfort in it. He got out a large sponge, took up the bucket he had brought from the well, and started at the end of one of the rows to wash clean the full udder of each of the forty-odd cows in turn. In a few minutes the milkers would be ready to begin, and to keep ahead of them he must have a clear start of a dozen cows.

When he had at last reached this point of vantage, the loud din of the streams against the sides of the milkers' tin pails had commenced behind him.

He rose, straightened his shoulders, and shook his red, dripping hands with a groan of pain. The icy water had well nigh frozen them.

It was a common thing for all about the barn to warm cold hands by thrusting them deep down into one of the barrels of brewers' grains which stood in a row beyond the oat-bin. The damp, crushed malt generates within its bulk so keen a heat that even when the top is frozen there will be steam within. Job went over and plunged his cold hands to the wrist in the smoking fodder. He held them there this morning for a luxurious extra minute, wondering idly as he did so how the cows sustained that merciless infliction of ice-water without any such comforting after-resource.

Suddenly he became conscious that his fingers, into which the blood was coming back with a stinging glow, had hit upon something of an unusual character in the barrel. He felt of it vaguely for a moment, then drew the object forth, rubbed off the coating of malt, and took it over to the lamp.

It was a finger-ring carved out of a thick gutta-percha button, but with more skill than the schoolboys of those days used to possess; and in its outer rim had been set a little octagonal silver plate, bearing some roughly cut initials.

Job seemed to remember having seen the ring before, and jumped to the conclusion that some one of the hired men had unconsciously slipped it off while warming his hands in the grains. He went back with it to the milkers, and went from one to another, seeking an owner.

Each lifted his head from where it rested against the cows flank, glanced at the trinket, and making a negative sign bent down again to his work. The last one up the row volunteered the added comment:

"You better hustle ahead with your spongin' off; I'm just about through here!"

The boy put the circlet in his pocket—it was much too large for any of his fingers—and resumed his task. The water was as terribly cold as ever, and the sudden change seemed to scald his skin; but somehow he gave less thought to his physical discomfort than before.

It was very funny to have found a ring like that. It reminded him of a story he had read somewhere, and could not now recall, save for the detail that in that case the ring contained a priceless jewel, the proceeds of which enriched the finder for life. Clearly no such result was to be looked for here. It was doubtful if anybody would give even twenty-five cents for this poor, home-made ornament. All the same it was a ring, and Job had a feeling that the manner of its discovery was romantic.

Working for a milkman does not open up so rich a field of romance that any hints of the curious or remarkable can be suffered to pass unnoticed. The boy pondered the mystery of how the ring got into the barrel. For a moment he dallied with the notion that it might belong to his employer, who owned the barn and almost all the land within sight, and a prosperous milk-route down in Octavius.

But no! Elisha Teachout was not a man given to rings; and even if he were, he assuredly would not have them of rubber. Besides, the grains had only been carted in from town two days before, and Mr. Teachout had been nursing his rheumatism indoors for fully a week.

It was more probable that some one down in the brewery at Octavius had lost the ring. When Job had been there for grains, he had noticed that the workers were cheerful and hearty fellows. No doubt they might be trusted to behave handsomely upon getting back a valued keepsake which had been given up as forever gone.

Perhaps—who could tell?—this humble, whittled-out piece of gutta-percha might be prized beyond rubies on account of its family associations. Such things had happened before, according to the story-books; and forthwith the lad lost himself in a maze of brilliant day-dreams, rose-tinted by this possibility.

He could almost behold himself adopted by the owner of the brewery—the fat, red-faced Englishman with the big watch-chain, whom he had seen once walking majestically among his vats. Perhaps, in truth, Job was a trifle drowsy.

All at once he roused himself with a start, and began to listen with all his ears. The milkers behind him were talking

about the ring. They had to shout to one another to overcome the fact of separation and the noise in their pails, and Job could hear every word.

"I tell you who had a ring like that—Mose Whipple," one of them called out. "Don't you remember? He made it with his jack-knife, that time he was laid up with the horse kickin' him in the knee."

"Seems's if I do," said another. "He was always whittlin' out somethin' or other—a peach-stone basket, or an ox-gad, or somethin'."

"Some one was tellin' me yesterday," put in a third, "that old man Whippf sick abed. Nobody ain't seen him around for up'ards of a fortnight. I guess this cold snap'll about see the last o' him. He's been poorly all the fall."

"He ain't never ben the same man since Mose 'listed," remarked the first speaker; "that is if you call it 'listin' when a man takes his three hundred dollars to go out as a substitute."

"Yes, and don't even git the money at that, but jest has it applied to the interest he owes on his mortgage. *That's* payin' for a dead horse, if anything is in this world!"

"Well, Mose is the sort o' chap that *would* be workin' to pay for some kind o' dead horse all his life, anyway. If it wasn't one it'd be another. Never knew a fellow in all my born days with so little git-up-and-git about him. He might as well be shoulderin' a musket as anything else, for all the profit he'd git out of it.

"A chip of the old block, if there ever was one. The old man always wanted to do a little berryin', an' a little fishin', an' a little huntin', an' keep a dozen traps or so in the

woods, an' he'd throw up the best-payin' job in the deestrict to have a loafin' spell when the fit took him—an' Mose was like him as two peas in a pod.

"I remember one year, Mose an' me hired out in the middle o' March, an' we hadn't fairly begun early ploughin' before he said he wasn't feelin' right that spring, an' give up half his month's wages to go home, an' then what do we see next day but him an' his father down by the bridge with their fishpoles, before the snow-water'd begun to git out o' the creek. What *kin* you do with men like that?"

"Make substitutes of 'em!" one of the milkers exclaimed, and at this there was a general laugh.

Every one on the farm, and for that matter on all the other farms for miles round, knew that Elisha Teachout had been drafted the previous summer, and had sent Moses Whipple to the front in his place. This relation between the rich man and the poor man was too common a thing in those war times to excite particular comment. But, as Mr. Teachout was not beloved by his hired men, they enjoyed a laugh whenever the subject came up.

Job had gone over to the lamp, during the progress of this talk, and scrutinized the ring. Surely enough, the clumsily scratched initials on the little silver plate, obviously cut down from an old three-cent piece, were an M and a W.

This made it all the more difficult to puzzle out how the ring came in the barrel. The lad turned the problem over in his mind with increasing bewilderment.

He had known Mose Whipple all his life. His own father, who died some years ago, had accounted Mose among his intimate friends, and Job's earliest recollections were of

seeing the two start off together of a spring morning with shot-guns on their shoulders and powder-flasks hung round their bodies.

They had both been poor men, and if they had not cared so much for hunting—at least if one of them had not—Job reflected that probably this very morning he himself would be sleeping in a warm bed, instead of freezing his hands in the hard employ of Elisha Teachout.

It was impossible not to associate Mose with these recriminatory thoughts; yet it was equally impossible to be angry with him long. The boy, indeed, found himself dwelling upon the amiable side of Mose's shiftless nature. He remembered how Mose used to come round to their poor little place, after Job's father's death, to see if he could help the widow and her brood in their struggle.

After Mrs. Parshall had married again, and gone West, leaving Job to earn his own living on the Teachout farm, Mose had always kept a kindly if intermittent eye on the boy. Only the previous Christmas he had managed, somehow, to obtain an old pair of skates as a present for Job, and when he had gone to the war in the following August, only the fact that he had to sell his shot-gun to pay a pressing debt prevented his giving that to the boy for his own.

The news that old Asa Whipple was ill forced its way to the top of Job's thoughts. He resolved that that very day, if he could squeeze in the time for it, he would cut across lots on the crust to the Whipple house, and see how the lonely old man was.

As the milkers said, old Asa had been "poorly" since his Mose went away. It was only too probable that he had been extremely poor as well.

Even when Mose was at home, theirs was the most poverty-stricken household in the township. Left to his own resources, and failing swiftly all at once in health, the father had tried to earn something by knitting mittens and stockings.

It had looked funny enough to see this big-framed, powerfully built old man fumbling at his needles like some grandmother in her rocking-chair by the stove.

It occurred to Job now that there was something besides humor in the picture. He had been told that people were making woollen mittens and stockings now, like everything else, by machinery. Very likely old Asa couldn't sell his things after he had knit them; and that might mean starvation.

Yes, that very day, in spite of everything, he would go over and see.

He had finished his task now. The milkers had nearly finished theirs. Two of the hired men were taking the cloth strainers off the tops of all the cans but one, and fastening on the covers instead. He could hear the bells on the harness of the horses outside, waiting with the big sleigh to rush off to town with the milk. It was still very dark out-of-doors.

Job put away his water-bucket, warmed his hands once more in the grains-barrel, and set about getting down a fresh supply of hay for the cows. Six weeks of winter had pretty well worn away the nearest haymow, and the boy had

to go further back toward the end of the barn, into a darkness which was only dimly penetrated by the rays of the lantern.

Working thus, guided rather by sense of touch than of sight, the boy suddenly felt himself stepping on something big and rounded, which had no business in a haymow. It rolled from under his feet, and threw him off his balance to his hands and knees. A muttered exclamation rose from just beside him, and then suddenly he was gripped bodily in the clutch of a strong man.

Frightened and vainly struggling, Job did not cry out, but twisted his head about in the effort to see who it was that he had thus strangely encountered. There was just light enough from the distant lantern to reveal in the face so menacingly close to his—of all unlooked-for faces in the world—that of Mose Whipple!

"Why, Mose!" he began, in bewilderment.

"Sh-h! Keep still!" came in a fierce whisper, "unless you want to see me hung higher than Haman!"

CHAPTER II.

A SUDDEN DEPARTURE.

Table of Contents

The man upon whose sleeping form Job had stepped in the haymow sat up and looked about him in a half-puzzled fashion, mechanically brushing the loose particles from his hair and neck.

"I s'pose it's mornin'," he whispered, after a minute's silence. "How long'll it be before daylight?"

Job, released from the other's clutch, had scrambled to his feet, and stood staring down in astonishment at his old friend, Mose Whipple. He had regained his fork, and held it up as if to repel a possible second attack.

"What did you want to pitch on to me that way for?" he asked at last in displeased tones.

"Sh-h! Talk lower!" urged Mose under his breath. "I didn't mean to hurt you, sonny. I didn't know who you was. You come tromplin' on me here when I was fast asleep, and I took hold of you when I wasn't hardly woke up, you see, that's all. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Sh-h! Talk Lower!"

"No," Job admitted grudgingly. "But there wasn't no need to throw me down and choke me all the same."

"I thought it was somebody comin' to catch me," explained the other, still in a whisper. "But who else is here in the barn? What time is it gettin' to be?"

"They're just through milkin'," replied the boy. "They're gettin' the cans out into the sleigh. They'll all be gone in a minute or two. Time? Oh, it ain't six yet."

"That's all right," said Mose, with a weary sigh of relief. He added, upon reflection: "Say, sonny, can you manage to

get me something to eat? I've gone the best part of two days now without a mouthful."

"Mebbe I can," responded Job, doubtingly. Then a sudden thought struck him. "Say, Mose," he went on, "I bet I can tell what you did the first thing when you came into the barn here. You went and stuck your hands into the grains there—that's how it was."

The man displayed no curiosity as to the boy's meaning. "Yes, by jiminy!" he mused aloud. "I'd 'a' liked to have got in head first. I tell you, sonny, I was about as near freezin' to death as they make 'em. I couldn't have gone another hundred rods to save my life. They'd have found me froze stiff on the road, that's all."

"But what are you doing here, anyway?" asked Job. "You ain't gone and deserted, have you?"

"Well," said the other, doggedly, "you can call it what you like. One thing's certain—I ain't down South, *be* I?"

"Something else is pretty certain, too," the boy put in. "They'll hang you, sure!"

Mose did not seem to have much doubt on this point. "Anyway, I'll see the old man first," he said. "It's pitch dark outdoors, ain't it?"

The boy nodded. "I must git along with my work," he commented, after another little silence. "What are you figgerin' on doin', anyway, Mose?" he asked gravely.

"Well, I'm goin' to sneak out while it's still dark," said the man, "and git across lots to our place, and just wake up the old man, and—and—well, see how he is, that's all. Mebbe I can manage it so that I can skip out again, and nobody be the wiser. But whether or no, that's what I'm bound to do.

Prob'ly you've heard—is he—is his health pretty middlin' good?"

"Seems to me some one was saying something about his being kind o' under the weather lately," replied Job, with evasion. "I was thinkin' of goin' over this afternoon myself, if I could git the time, to see him. The fact is, Mose, I guess he *is* failing some. It's been a pretty tough winter for old folks, you know. Elisha Teachout's been laid up himself with rheumatics now for more'n a fortnight, and he ain't old exactly."

"He ain't had 'em half bad enough!" cried Mose, springing to his feet with suddenly revived energy. "If he's let the old man suffer—if he ain't kept his word by him—I'll—I'll take it out of his old hide if I have to go to jail for it!"

"You've got enough other things to go to jail for, and get hung for into the bargain, I should think," said Job. "You'd better not talk so loud, either."

Surely enough, one of the hired men seemed to have remained in the barn, and to have caught the sound of voices—for the noise of his advancing footsteps could be heard on the floor between the stanchions. Mose threw himself flat, and rolled under the hay as best he could. Job began to sing in a low-voiced, incoherent way for a moment, and then loudly. Prying up a forkful of hay, he staggered under the burden back to the cows, singing as he came toward the intruder.

It was only Nelse Hornbeck, an elderly and extra hand who worked at starvation wages during the winter, chopping firewood and doing odd chores about the house and barns. When he saw Job he stopped. He was in a sociable mood,

and though he leaned up against one of the stanchions and offered no sign of going farther, displayed a depressing desire for conversation.

The boy came and went, bringing in the hay and distributing it along under the double row of broad pink noses on either side. He made the task as long as he could in the hope of tiring Nelse out, but without avail.

"I dunno but I'm almost sorry I didn't enlist myself last fall," drawled Hornbeck, settling himself in an easy posture. "So far's I can make out, Mose Whipple and the rest of the boys are having a great sight better time of it down South, with nothin' to do and plenty o' help to do it, than we are here to hum. Why, Steve Trimble's brother-in-law writes him that they're havin' more fun down there than you can shake a stick at; livin' snug and warm in sort o' little houses built into the ground, and havin' horse-races and cock-fights and so on every day. They ain't been no fightin' since Thanksgivin', he says, and they're all gittin' fat as seals."

"Well, why *don't* you enlist then?" demanded Job, curtly, going on with his work.

"I dunno," said the hired man in a meditative way. "I guess I'm afeard o' gittin' homesick. I'd always be hankerin' to git back and see my folks, and they won't let you do that, nohow. A lot of 'em tries to sneak off, they say, but Steve's brother-in-law says they've got cavalry-men on horseback all around outside the camps, and they just nail everybody that tries to git out, and then they take 'em back to camp and shoot 'em. That's what they do—lead 'em out before breakfast and shoot 'em down."

"I thought they hung deserters," said Job, pausing with his fork in air.

"Some they hang and some they shoot," replied Nelse. "I don't see as it makes much difference. I'd about as lieve be one as the other. I guess they make it a rule to hang them that gits off into the North and has to be brought way back again. That's only reasonable, because they've give 'em so much extry trouble."

Job was interested. "But suppose a man does get up North—I guess they ain't much chance of their ever findin' him after that."

"Ain't they?" exclaimed the hired man, incredulously. "Why, it's a thousand to one they catch him! They've got their detectives in every county just doin' nothin' but watchin' for deserters. They git paid for every one they catch, so much a head, and that makes 'em keep their eyes peeled."

"But how can you tell a deserter from any other man," pursued Job, "so long as he's got ordinary clothes on and minds his own business and keeps away from where he's known?"

"Oh, they always point for home—that's the thing of it. What do they desert for? Because they're homesick. So all the detectives have got to do is to watch their place, and nab 'em when they try to sneak in. It's as easy as rollin' off a log. They always git caught, every mother's son of 'em."

Tiresome Nelse Hornbeck was still talking when Job came to the end of all possible pretexts of employment in the cow-barn, and was only too obviously waiting to accompany

the boy over to the house to breakfast. At last Job had to accept the situation and go.

The boy dared no more than steal for a moment back into the hay, feel about with his foot for where Mose lay hidden in the dark, and drop the furtive whisper, "Going to breakfast. If I can I'll bring you some."

Then, in company with Nelse, he left the barn, shutting and hooking the door behind him. It occurred to him that Mose must have effected an entrance by the door at the other end, which was fastened merely by a latch. Otherwise the displacement of the outer hook would have been noticed.

It was lucky, he thought in passing, that Elisha Teachout did not have padlocks on the doors of his cow-barn, as he had on those which protected his horses and wagons and grain. If he had, there would have been the lifeless and icy body of Mose, lying on the frozen roadside, to be discovered by the daylight.

Poor Mose! he had saved his life from the bitterly cold night, but was it not only to lose it again at the hands of the hangman or the firing party?

Job remembered having seen, just a few weeks before, a picture in one of the illustrated weeklies of a deserter sitting on his own coffin, while files of soldiers were being drawn up to witness his impending punishment. Although the artist had given the doomed man a very bad face indeed, Job had been conscious at the time of feeling a certain human sympathy with him.

As his memory dwelt now on the picture, this face of the prisoner seemed to change into the freckled and happy-go-

lucky lineaments of Mose Whipple.

The boy took with him into the house a heart as heavy as lead.

Breakfast was already well under way in the big, old-fashioned, low-ceiled kitchen of the Teachout homestead. Three or four hired men were seated at one end of the long table, making stacks of hot buckwheat cakes saturated with pork fat on their plates, and then devouring them in huge mouthfuls.

They had only the light of two candles on the table. So long as there was anything before them to eat, they spoke never a word. The red-faced women over at the stove did not talk either, but worked in anxious silence at their arduous task of frying cakes fast enough to keep the plates before the hungry men supplied.

For once in his life Job was not hungry. He suffered Nelse Hornbeck to appropriate the entire contents of the first plate of cakes which the girl brought to the table, without a sign of protest. This was not what usually happened, and as soon as Nelse could spare the time he looked at his companion in surprise.

"What ails you this mornin'?" he asked, with his spoon in the grease. "Ain't you feelin' well?"

Job shook his head. "I guess I'll eat some bread 'n' butter instead," he made reply. He added after a pause, "Somehow, I kind o' spleen against cakes this mornin'."

"They ain't much good to-day, for a fact," assented Nelse, when he had eaten half-way through his pile. "I guess they want more sody. It beats me why them women can't make their cakes alike no two days in the week. First the

batter's sour, and then they put in more sody; and then it's too flat, and they dump in a lot o' salt; and then they need more graham flour, and then the batter's too thick, and has to be thinned down with milk, and by that time the whole thing's wrong, and they've got to begin all over again."

Nelse chuckled, and looked up at Job, who paid no attention.

"If we men fooled around with the cows' fodder, every day different," Nelse went on, "the way the girls here do with ours, why, the whole barnful of 'em would 'a' dried up before snow blew. But that's the way with women!" Mr. Hornbeck concluded with a sigh, and began on the second heap of cakes.

The boy had not listened. A project had been gradually shaping itself in his mind, until now it seemed as if he had left the cow-barn with it definitely planned out. As soon as the other men, who for the moment were idling with their knives and forks, had been supplied with a fresh batch of cakes, he would put it into execution.

"Why, you was feelin' first rate a few minutes ago," remonstrated Nelse, between mouthfuls, "singin' away for dear life."

"Remember how Mose Whipple used to sing?" put in one of the others. "The' was one song o' his, 'The Faded Coat o' Blue'—seems's if I could set and listen to him singin' that all day long. He sung it over at Steve Trimble's huskin', I remember, and Lib Truax let him see her home, just on account of it. She wouldn't so much as looked at him any other time. She told my sister afterward that if he'd 'a'

popped the question then, with that singin' o' his in her ears, as like as not she'd 'a' said yes."

"Lucky for her he didn't, then," remarked another. "I give Mose credit for one thing, though. He had sense enough not to git married—and that's more'n most shiftless coots like him have. He always said that as long's the old man was alive, he'd keep a roof over his head, and let everything else slide. Whatever else you may say, there's no denyin' Mose was a good son to the old man."

"If I was old," said a third, "and was dependent on my son, I'd think a good deal more of him if he shinned around, and worked stiddy, and put somethin' by for a rainy day, even if he did marry into the bargain, instid o' bein' bone-lazy like Mose, and never knowin' one day where the next day's breakfast was comin' from."

"Not if you was old Asa Whipple," rejoined the first speaker. "Mose was jest after the old man's heart. I never see father and son so wrapped up in one another as them two was. Seems's if they didn't need no other company—they was company enough for themselves. That's what made it so rough on the old man when Mose 'listed."

"He couldn't help himself," said Nelse Hornbeck; "there was the interest comin' due on the mortgage, and how else ——"

"Sh-h! can't ye!" muttered one of the others, kicking Nelse under the table, and giving a backward nod of the head toward the women by the stove. "Want them to tell 'Lishe Teachout you're blabbin' about his affairs, you sawney?"