FREDERIC HAROLD

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

Harold Frederic

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Содержание

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THE DESERTER

CHAPTER I.
DISCOVERIES IN THE BARN

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

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?"

"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?"

Nelse bent hastily over his cakes, and the others busied themselves at making way with the steaming fresh supply which had accumulated while they talked.

Job's opportunity had come. He rose with as fine an assumption of carelessness as he could manage, and walked up to the other end of the table, where the big loaf of home-made bread and the butter-dish were.

He cut off two thick slices; the butter which he tried to spread upon them had become hard with the night's intense cold, and had not been near enough to the fire to be softened. So Job could only distribute it in lumps over the soft surface of one slice, and then put the other on top of it.

Then, watching his chance in the dim light, he conveyed the bread to his jacket pocket. Nobody at the table had observed him, he was sure.

He turned to discover that the sitting-room door close at his back had been opened wide, and that Elisha Teachout was

standing in the doorway, looking at him with all his eyes.

It was Elisha Teachout's habit to look very closely at everything and everybody – and his was at the best of times a somewhat uncomfortable gaze to sustain. Job felt that this was not one of the best of times.

His employer was in all seasons an austere and exacting man, coldly suspicious of those about him, and as pitiless in his treatment of his hired help's shortcomings as he was vigilant in looking out for them. But in the winter, when rheumatism put its dread touch upon the marrow of his bones, he was irascible as well, and led his household what they used to describe outside as "a life of it."

His lean, small figure did not seem as much bent as usual this morning – probably he was better, Job thought – but his little steel-colored eyes had an abnormally piercing effect. His pallid face, hairless and wrinkled, with its sunken lips and sharply hooked nose, was of a yellower and sourer aspect than usual, too. The boy felt himself turning very red.

It turned out to be a needless alarm. Mr. Teachout diverted his gaze from Job to look at his old silver watch, which he took from his fob, and then ostentatiously held it in his hand.

"Milk late again this morning?" he demanded, raising his querulous voice with a snap.

"No, it got off in good season," replied the head hired man, nonchalantly.

He had answered the same question now every day for several

years, and was at home with it. As a matter of fact the milk from the Teachout farm was never late, but this had not prevented the masters query becoming a formula.

"Then breakfast ought to 'a' been out of the way half an hour ago!" he exclaimed, in the same high, snarling tone. "If I didn't get up and come out, sick as I am, I suppose you'd be settin' here gorging yourselves till noon! And you women, you jest aid and abet 'em in their laziness and gormandizing!"

Job stayed to hear no more. Relieved from his fear of detection, he had taken advantage of the attack upon the others to get his cap and sidle unobtrusively from the room.

Once outside he scampered headlong across the frozen ruts and hummocks of the yard to the cow-barn. There was a perilous show of pink and lemon lights in the eastern sky. Very soon it would be daylight.

He groped his way past between the stanchions to the hay, and began feeling about with his feet.

"Here you are, Mose!" he called out. "It's almost daylight! Here's something to eat."

No answer came. The boy trampled foot by foot over the whole mow in vain. Mose Whipple was gone.

CHAPTER III.
FATHER AND SON

It is not likely that anything whatever remains standing now of the Whipple house. It must be a dozen years ago that I shot a black squirrel as it whisked its way along over the ridge-beam which had once been Asa Whipple's roof-tree; and the place then was in ruins. The rafters had fallen in; what was left of the sides were dry-rotten under a mask of microscopic silver-gray moss. Tangled masses of wild-brier and lichens surrounded its base, and pushed their way in through the open, dismantled doorway.

Even at that time, the road which once led past the house had fallen into disuse. I suppose that to-day it would be as hard to find the house under the briers as to trace the ancient highway beneath the carpet of grass and sorrel.

Even during the war, when human beings thought of it as a home, the Whipple place was a pretty poor sort of habitation. The lowliest of Elisha Teachout's live-stock were considerably better housed and better sheltered from the weather than old Asa and his son Mose.

The house, as I remember it, used to interest me because it was so obviously a remainder from the days when the district round about was still a veritable part of the Adirondacks. Whether Asa built it or inherited it from his father, a Revolutionary soldier who took up his land-patent in these primitive parts, I never knew.

It looked old enough, though, to have been erected by Hendrik Hudson himself.

There must have been a sawmill on the creek at the time, however, for it was not a log house but a frame building, with broad planks nailed roughly to its sides, and the joinings of these covered over with weather-strips.

The frames of the door and the two front windows also came from this mill, wherever it was; the window on the north side was of rude construction, and was evidently the work of some person not greatly skilled in the use of carpenters' tools; perhaps it was made by old Asa himself.

There was a legend that the roof had once been shingled; in my time it was made of flattened breadths of spruce bark, which must have leaked sadly in rainy seasons. There was no cellar under the house, but a rough lean-to woodshed at the back served to shelter any overflow of possessions which might trouble the Whipples. This lean-to was given over chiefly to traps, fishpoles, netting gear, and the like.

There was a barn, but it was roofless and long since disused.

I dare say the original Revolutionary Whipple aimed at being a farmer, like the rest of his neighbors. Like the others, he cleared his land, got in his crops, built a barn for his cattle and produce, and ran up rail fences. Perhaps he even prospered thus, as prosperity was measured in those lean, toilsome times.

But either in his day, or when his son Asa was a comparatively young man, the hand of fate was laid on the Whipple place. The

black moss came!

Strong and intelligent farmers, with capital behind them, can successfully fight and chase off nowadays, they say, this sinister scourge of the thin-soiled northern farm lands on the forests edges. But forty years ago, and even much later, it was a common saying that when the moss came, the man must go.

Asa Whipple did not go. He let farming go instead. When the moss had seized upon pasture and meadow alike, nothing was simpler than to sell the cows, and allow the barn to fall to pieces. Much better than taking anxious thought about the farm, it suited Asa to turn to the woods – the kindly, lazy, mysteriously tempting woods.

Here were no back-aching ploughs and scythes, no laborious hoeing of corn and grubbing for roots, and painful wrestling with rain and drought and frost – and worst of all, the moss – for pitiful coppers. Here instead were luscious trout for the hook, and otter, mink, and even an occasional beaver for the trap; here in the greenwood, to the trained hunter, was spread a never-ending banquet of rare and toothsome meats, from the game birds, the raccoon, and the squirrel, up to the fleet-heeled deer and the black bear, lounging his clumsy way through the undergrowth.

Like father, like son. Time came, indeed, when the woods were no longer what they had been, and when the influence of advancing civilization compelled Mose to eke out a scanty living for his father and himself by hiring out a week or two now and then during busy seasons on the farms roundabout.

He did this as seldom as he could, however, and he never pretended that he liked to do it at all.

Of their own land, the Whipples for years had cultivated only a garden-patch close about the house, and this in so luke-warm a fashion that the net results – some potatoes, a little sweet corn, a few pumpkins, and so on – never by any chance saw them through the winter.

Why they did not sell this unproductive land to Elisha Teachout, who evidently wanted it, instead of borrowing money from him on it to pay taxes for it, I could never understand. Very likely they did not try to explain it to themselves.

But it was the fact, nevertheless, that in July of 1863 they owed Mr. Teachout something over three hundred dollars in accrued interest upon the mortgages he held, and that to prevent his foreclosing and evicting them from the house, Mose Whipple went to the war as Teachout's substitute.

This year of 1863 had still a week of life before it on the morning in question – when Mose returned from the war.

He had made across the stiff-crusted level wastes of snow from Teachout's straight as the bee's flight, even before the dawn began to break. He had heard the talk in the barn about the certainty of his capture, but it made little impression on his mind. It did not even occur to him that the matter concerned him. What had stirred him was Job Parshall's roundabout and reluctant admission that all was not right with the old man.

He had waited only a few minutes in the haymow after Job

had gone to the farm-house before the temptation to be off again toward home mastered him. It was silly to linger here for food when the goal was so close at hand.

He took a couple of English turnips from one of the fodder bins to eat on the way, and let himself cautiously out by the rear door of the cow-barn.

It was still quite dark and bitterly cold, but he started briskly off. After he had left the barnyard an idea occurred to him. His father might be perishing of hunger! He turned and bent his steps back across the yard to the hen-house, opened the door, and crept in. A cackling murmur fell upon the darkened silence, rising all at once into a harsh and strident squawking, then ceasing abruptly.

Mose emerged upon the instant, shut and hooked the door, and started to run, stuffing a big, limp and shapeless object into his coat pocket.

When he had rapped upon and rattled vigorously for a third time the window on the north side of the house he had journeyed so far and risked so much to return to, Mose was conscious of a heavy, sudden sinking of the heart. That was the bedroom window; how was it his father had not heard him?

He knocked once more, more loudly than before, and bent his head to listen. No answer came.

After a minute's waiting he walked around to the front of the house. In the broad daylight which had spread itself now over the white landscape, he noticed something he had missed before. There had been no path cut through from the house to the road.

The frozen drifts lay packed as they had fallen upon the doorsill. There was no mark of footsteps save his own. The window-panes were opaque with frost.

Mose tried the latch. It yielded readily, and he entered. The light inside was so dim, after the morning glow on the snow without, that it was hard at first to make out the room, familiar as it was to him. Apparently there was no one there.

A curious change of some sort there had been, though. Mose shut the door and walked across to the stove, instinctively holding his hands over it. So dull a semblance of warmth radiated up from the griddles that he put a finger on the metal. It was only blood-warm.

Some one had left a fire here an hour ago. Where was his father? What had happened?

Then Mose saw what it was that had at the outset vaguely puzzled him. The straw tick had been brought from the bed in the other room and spread there on the floor behind the stove. It was covered with bedding and old clothes, and under these —

In a flash Mose was on his knees beside the improvised bed, and had pushed away the coverings at the top. There was disclosed before him the head of a man asleep – a head which he scarcely recognized at first sight, so profuse and dishevelled were its masses of white hair and beard, so pinched to ghastliness the waxen features.

"He is dead!" Mose heard himself say aloud, in a voice that sounded not at all his own.

But no; there was warmth, and a feeble flicker of pulse at the shrunken wrist which he instinctively fumbled for under the bedclothes.

"Father! Father!" Mose called, bending till his lips touched the white hair. "Wake up! I've come back! it's me – Mose!"

The faintest stir of life passed over the corpse-like face, and old Asa opened his eyes. It did not seem as though he saw his son, or anything else. His whitened lips moved, emitting some husky, unintelligible sounds. Mose, stooping still lower, strained his ears to piece together these terrible words: —

"Starved – many days – don't tell Mose!"

With a cry of rage and horror Mose sprang to his feet. The things to be done mapped themselves, in the stress of this awful situation, with lightning swiftness before his brain. He strode to the woodshed door and opened it. Two sides of the old lean-to were gone, and the snow was drifted thick across the floor.

Mose realized that the shed had gone for fuel, and in another minute he had torn down half the roof, and was crushing the boards to splinters under his heels.

With the same fierce haste he started the fire blazing again; got out an old frying-pan from under the snow, and put it, filled with ice to be melted into water, on one of the open griddle holes; hacked the remaining turnip into slices, and then began at the fowl, stripping the feathers off in handfuls, and dismembering it as fast as he cleared the skin from joint to joint, filling the rusty old pan to the brim.

Even as he worked thus, and after the water was steaming, and the rude stew under way, he kept an eager and apprehensive eye upon the bed behind the stove. No token of life was forthcoming.

He could not hear his father breathe, even when he bent over him; but no doubt that was on account of the prodigious spluttering and crackling which the fire kept up. Through the other griddle hole he continually thrust in fresh, dry kindlings to swell the blaze.

He had learned some new things about cooking in the army – among others the value of a pot-lid in hurrying forward the stew. He looked about for a cover for the frying-pan. There was no such thing in the house, but he found in the shed an old sheet-iron snow-shovel, and made the blade of this serve, with a nail-hole punched through it to let out the steam.

In his researches he was glad to run upon some salt, because it would help toward making the mess on the stove palatable. But it would not be easy to tell with what emotions he discovered that there was absolutely not another eatable thing in the house.

The room had grown decently warm again, under the influence of the roaring fire, and now it began to be filled with what Mose believed to be a most delicious odor.

The conviction, though to any one else it might well have seemed unwarranted, was pardonable in Mose perhaps, for he himself had tasted his last warm meal nearly sixty hours before.

He munched the turnip peelings almost contentedly as he recalled this fact. Perhaps there would be some of the stew left,

after the old man had eaten his fill. If not, there were parts of the fowl which could still be utilized.

An absurd sort of fantasy – a kind of foolish day-dream – began all at once to rise before him. He seemed to see himself eating the whole of that glorious stew, lingering with all his soul over the luxury of each piping-hot mouthful, and giving his father none at all.

This visionary thing grew so upon him, so gripped and enthralled his mind, that it made him dizzy and faint to put it away from him. When, a few minutes later, the smell of burning warned him that the cooking was done, and he lifted the pan from the stove, this brutal temptation rushed savagely at him again. He set the pan on the table, and walked away, not daring to lift the cover.

There were two or three old plates on the shelf, and a tea-cup. Mose got them all down, and arrayed them on the table, with such cutlery and spoons as he could find. He made a motion then to take off the improvised lid from the frying-pan, but once more drew back. It was as if he could not trust himself.

He knelt by the bedside again, now, and putting his arm under his father's neck sought to raise him to a more upright posture. Old Asa opened his eyes as before, and made an effort to whisper something, but he lay an almost inert weight in his son's arms.

Mose swung the tick round, propped the end of it up against the wall and raised his father into a half-sitting posture.

In this position the old man's face took on a sudden expression

of interest and reviving intelligence. He had begun to smell the savor of the food.

Looking upon that pallid, vacant, starved face, and wasted, helpless form, Mose, starving himself, felt strong enough to defy the most appetizing stew in the world. He took off the cover with decision, and dipped the tea-cup up half full of the smoking contents. It was too hot, evidently, to be given to the old man at once, and it was also very thick.

Mose took it out to the dismantled woodshed, and spooned in snow until it seemed of the right temperature and consistency. He dipped a little finger into it to further satisfy himself, but he would not even lick that finger afterward. It was too dangerous to think about.

Mose fed his father as a mother might a baby – watching solicitously to see that he did not eat too fast or choke himself. After the first cupful, he brought a chair to sit in, and held the tick against his knee while old Asa, leaning more lightly upon it, helped himself.

There was a little left at last for Mose, and he swallowed it gravely, with a portentous rush of sensations within, but keeping up as best he could an indifferent exterior. It left him still hungry, but he had much more important things to dwell upon than that.

The meal worked wonders upon the old man. The combined influences of food and warmth seemed for a few minutes to send him off to sleep again.

Mose sat looking down upon him in silence, and noting that

something like color was stealing back into his face.

All at once, however, Asa Whipple sat upright, lifted his hands to brush back the hair from his forehead, and, turning his face up to look at his son, smiled. There was no lack of comprehension in his gaze. He had regained his tongue as well. He patted Mose's knee as he spoke.

"Mose," he said, in a voice strangely altered and aged, but clear enough, "I'm kind o' 'shamed to tell it, but I'd laid down here just to go to sleep for good. I thought for quite a spell there, after you come in, that I was dreaming – sort o' out o' my head, you know."

"How did you come to let yourself down like this, dad?" was the only reply Mose had at hand.

"Rheumatiz," Asa explained. "It laid me up – I couldn't git around, an' nobody come near me. I ain't seen a soul since the big snowfall – up'ards of a fortnight. But – but it's all right now, ain't it, Mose? An' to think o' your comin' home here like this, right in the nick o' time. How did you come to git off, Mose?"

For answer there fell the crunching sound of footsteps on the crusted snow outside, then of a loud, peremptory knock on the door.

CHAPTER IV.
THE "MEANEST WORD."

Mose Whipple had lifted his head in apprehensive inquiry at the sound of the footsteps outside the door of the cabin. He sprang to his feet when the sharp knock on the door followed. Holding a hand downward with outspread fingers as a warning to silence, he tiptoed out to the middle of the room, then paused and listened.

The knock came again, bolder and more peremptory still.

Vague notions of resistance were shaping themselves in Mose's mind. He glanced up at the shot-gun hanging on the chimney behind the stovepipe, and in another instant had it down, with his thumb on the hammer.

"Loaded?" he asked in a whisper, testing the percussion-cap with his nail.

The old man nodded. Then he, too, laboriously rose to his feet. Bent as his form was, he stood a taller man than his son. He rested one hand on the table for support, and stretched out the other with a masterful gesture.

"Gimme that gun!" he said, in brusque command. Then covering Mose from head to foot, he added, slowly, "I'd ruther have starved a hundred times over than had you do this sort o' thing!"

Mose had sheepishly laid the weapon on the table. He walked

now with a sullen air to the door, lifted the hook, and put his hand on the latch.

"Let me in out of the cold, can't ye?" a shrill voice complained outside. "It's only me, you gump!"

Mose's face brightened. "Why, it's only young Job Parshall, after all!" he said, and threw the door wide open.

The boy pushed past Mose without a word, and marching across the room to the stove held his red fingers over the griddles. He lifted them a little for inspection after a minute's silence, and screwed his shoulders about in token of the pain they gave him.

"I couldn't run with my hands in my pockets," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if they was froze. That's just my luck."

Mose advanced to the stove, and looked at Job's hands critically. "That little finger there is a trifle tetched, I guess," he said. "It'll be sore for a day or two, that's all. The rest are all right." Then he added, noting the boy's crimson cheeks and panting breast, "Why, sonny, you must 'a' run the whole way!"

Job nodded assent, and turned his hands palm upward. "Every inch of the way," he said between heavy breaths.

Old Asa had sunk again into a chair, and sat gazing in turn at Mose and the boy. The fire which had glowed in his eyes when he had confronted his son had died away again. He was visibly striving not to tremble, and the glance he bent from one to the other was wistful and shame-faced.

"I suppose you've brought some news," he remarked at last to Job.

The boy nodded again, twisting his fingers experimentally in the heat. "When I catch my breath, I'll tell ye," he said.

There was a moment's awkward silence; then Asa Whipple, speaking in low, deliberate tones, rid his mind of some of its burden.

"My son Mose here," he said gravely, "didn't use to be a coward. I didn't bring him up to be no coward. Seems to me you can bring up a boy so't he'll be honest and straightforward and square right up to the last minute, and then lo and behold! he cuts up some low-down, mean dido or other that makes you 'shamed to look folks in the face.

"My father fit in the Revolution, and so did my mother's father and his brothers, – their name was Lapham, and they lived in Rhode Island, – and my older brother, Jason, he was killed up at Sackett's Harbor in the 1812 War before he come of age; and they ain't one of 'em but 'ud turn in his grave to think they was a coward and a deserter in the family!"

Mose stood behind the stove, stealing furtive glances at the old man during this harangue. Once or twice he opened his lips as if to speak, but either no words would come, or he thought better of it.

But Job listened with obvious impatience. He had quite regained his breath. "Mose ain't no coward!" he broke in vehemently. "It took a mighty sight more pluck to light out there, of a night, and come way off up here just to see how you were gettin' on, and have to hide for his life, than it would to have

stayed right still where he was, with no fightin' and no work, and three square meals a day."

"You might say four, a'most, countin' supper," Mose suggested softly.

Old Asa Whipple seemed impressed with this view of the situation, and pondered it for a little in silence.

"What I come over to say was," remarked Job, more placidly, "that they're out lookin' for you, Mose. Two men drove up in a cutter just after breakfast – one of 'em's Norm' Hazzard, the deputy marshal down at Octavius, and the other fellow's name is Moak, I b'lieve, and they've stopped to Teachout's to breakfast. They started from Octavius before daylight, and they was about froze solid by the time they got to 'Lishe's. They took out their horse, and they've got so much thawin' out to do themselves, I reckon they ain't more'n about started now, if they have that."

"You come straight?" asked Mose.

"Well, you'd better believe I did! I scooted 'cross lots like greased lightnin' the minute they went in t' the house. It's a good hour 'round by the road, even when it's all open. It's drifted now all the way from the sash factory down to Taft's place, and it's slow work gettin' through the fields. As I figure it, you've got more'n an hour's leeway."

The two men looked at each other as they listened, and they kept up the mutual gaze after the boy had stopped.

"'Pears to me, dad," Mose finally ventured in a deferential way, "that you don't seem to take this thing quite in the right

spirit. I tell you straight out, if it was the last word I ever spoke, I ain't done nothin' I'm ashamed of. A man can't say no more'n that."

"Accordin' to the way I was brought up," replied old Asa, doggedly, "they ain't no other such an all-fired, pesky mean name for a man in the dictionary as 'desarter.'"

"Well, anyway," retorted Mose, "I'd ruther be called 'desarter' myself than have you be called 'starved to death.' So far's I can make out, if it hadn't ben one, it 'ud ben t'other."

The old man's glance abruptly sought the floor, and lingered there. The others, as they watched him, could see the muscles of his down-bent face twitching.

"Besides, they didn't need me down there just now," Mose went on in more voluble self-defence, "no more'n a frog needs a tail. An' besides that, they played it monstrous low-down on me. That German fellow that used to work at the tannery, he was my sergeant, and he kept them big eyes of his skinned for me all day long. Him and me never hitched very well down at the mills, you know, and he took it out of me whenever he got a chance.

"He got all the officers down on me. One day they'd say I'd burnt the coffee, and the next day that my gun was dirty, and after that that I was a 'malingerer,' – that's officers' slang for a shirk, – and so on; and every time it meant that some of my pay got stopped. That's why I never sent you any money.

"They worked it so't I never got more'n about ten shillings out of my thirteen dollars, and that I owed twice over before I got it."

Old Asa was looking into his son's face once more, and he nodded comprehendingly as the other paused. "We never did git a fair show, like other men," he remarked.

"But I could 'a' stood all that," continued Mose. "What riled me was when Bill Rood got a letter sayin' that you was poorly, and you stopped writin'; and then I took pains and behaved extra well, so't even the Dutchman couldn't put his finger on me. And then I got a chance one day, and I asked one of the lieutenants that I'd kind o' curried favor with, doin' odd jobs for him and so on, if he couldn't git me a furlough, just to run home and see how you was gittin' on."

"I reckon *you* never got that, Mose."

"No, dad. They was givin' 'em right and left to other fellows, and the lieutenant said he guessed he could manage it. I don't know how hard he tried, but a few days after that I see the Dutchman grinnin' at me, and I felt in my bones that the jig was up. Sure enough, they wouldn't let me have a furlough because I'd been euchred out of my pay. They wa'n't no other reason."

"No," said the old man, "that was always the way. I guess me and you ought to be pretty well used to gittin' the worst of it, by this time. There's a text in the Bible that's our own private family property, as much as if it had 'Whipple' marked on it in big letters. It's that one that says that when a man ain't got anything, he gits took away from him even what he's got. That's me, Mose, and it's you, too."

Mose had quite recovered his confidence now.

"Of course, if there'd ben any fightin' goin' on, it'd ben different," he explained, "but right in the middle of our winnin' everything along in November, after we'd chased the Johnnies across the Rappahannock and the Rapidan, and was havin' it all our own way – and in spite of the rain freezin' as it fell, and no shelter and marchin' till your feet was ready to fall off, we all liked it first-rate – along come orders for us to go back again to winter quarters around Brandy Station. So far as I could see, it was all station and no brandy. And then the new drafted men, they behaved like sin in camp, and orders got stricter, and my Dutchman piled it onto me thicker and thicker, and I got to frettin' about you – and so – so I – I lit out."

"You'd better begin figgerin' on lightin' out agin," said the practical Job. "I suppose you'll take to the woods, won't you?"

Mose nodded, and reached his hand out for the gun. "Yes," he said, "five minutes' start'll be all I need. Once I git across the creek I'm all right. One thing's lucky, there's plenty of powder and shot in the cupboard there, I see. I suppose, if worst comes to worst, I could get through the woods up to Canada. But see here, – this is a good deal more important, – what are you going to do, dad, after I'm gone?"

Old Asa had hardly given this important question a thought before. As it was forced upon him now, his mind reverted mechanically to that strange awakening, when he lay in the starved half-stupor on the very threshold of death, and Mose came in, like some good angel of a dream, to bring him back

to life again. A rush of tenderness, almost of pride, suddenly suffused the old man's brain.

"Mose," he said, all at once, "I guess I talked more or less like a fool, here awhile back. Perhaps some folks are entitled to blame you for turnin' up here, this mornin' – but I ain't one of 'em, and I ought to known better. I'm stronger, my boy, ever so much stronger, for seein' you and – eatin' a good meal again. You'll see – I'll be as sound again as a butternut. I bet I could walk this minute to the bridge without a break."

"But that wouldn't feed you, after you got there," objected Mose. "Of course if I could hang around in the neighborhood, and drop in every now and then to keep an eye on you, it 'ud be different. But they're sure to watch the place, and with me caught you'd be worse off than ever. I'd give myself up this minute if only I knew you'd be all right. But that's the hang of it. There's no mistake, dad," he added, with a rueful sort of grin, "the last bell was a-ringin' for you when I turned up here, this mornin'."

It was characteristic of these two men, born and bred here in the robust air of the forest's borders, that as they confronted this dilemma, not the shadow of a notion of that standing alternative, the county-house, crossed either mind. Even if Mose could have thought of it, he would never have dared suggest it to Asa.

"Come, you'd better be gittin' together what you're goin' to take with you," broke in Job, peremptorily. "You've got none too much time to spare."

"Yes, I know," said Mose, with hesitation; "but the old man

here – that worries me."

"You just 'tend to your own knittin'," was the boy's reply. "Asa and me'll manage for ourselves all right."

Old Asa Whipple opened his eyes wide – not at surprise at hearing his Christian name fall so glibly from the boy's tongue, for that is the custom of the section, but with bewilderment at his meaning.

"What on earth are you drivin' at?" demanded Mose, no whit less puzzled.

"Well," said Job, with deliberation, "I've kind o' soured on that Teachout job of mine. I've had it in my mind to quit all along, when I got the chance, and I guess this is about as good as any. I've got along toward twenty dollars saved up, and there's three days' work a week for me at the cheese-factory whenever I want to take it, and I could go to school the other days, and both places are handier to git at from here than they are from Teachout's. So I'll rig up a bed and so on here, and I'll look out for the old man. But do you go ahead, and git out!"

It is another custom of these parts to be undemonstrative in the face of the unexpected.

Mose merely clapped his hand on Job's shoulder, and said, "You won't ever be sorry for it, sonny," which had much more of loose prediction than of pledge about it, yet seemed quite sufficient for them both.

The old man said nothing at all, but sat bending forward in his chair, his gaze fastened upon every move his son made about

the room. For everything Mose did now spoke plainly of another parting, more sombre and sinister than the last. A soldier may come back, but how can one hope for the return of a deserter?

Mose's old instincts as a woodsman rose superior to the exigencies of a life and death flight. He prepared as if for a holiday camping jaunt into the wilderness – in a hurried manner, but forgetting nothing.

He made a pile of things on the table – all the powder and shot in the house, most of the salt, some old stockings, a tin cup, fork and spoon, and what matches he could find – and then stowed them away in flasks and his pockets, along with a whole tangled mass of lines, hooks and catgut fishing gear.

From under the snow in the dismantled shed he unearthed a smaller frying-pan and two steel traps, and slung these with a string through handle and chains across his shoulder. Then he took up the gun and was ready.

"I guess this'll see me through," he said lightly.

Old Asa gazed at him through dimmed eyes. "No, you must take a blanket, Mose," he said. "I won't hear no for an answer – you must! There's plenty more for us. If they ain't, we can git more. They're cheap as dirt. And Mose," the old man rose from his chair as he spoke, "I was a-goin' to ask you to sing for me afore you went, but I – I guess we'd better let that go till we meet again. You'll be all right in the woods – "

"Why, I know twenty places," put in Mose, "where I'll be as snug as a bug in a rug. I'll make straight for a deer yard. Mebbe" –

he chuckled at the thought – "I'll be bringing you in some venison some o' these nights. Prob'ly I'll hang it up on a tree – the old butternut by the fork – so't Job can come out and git it in the mornin'. And in the spring – why you must come in the spring and – and be with me in the woods."

The old man's strength had waned once more, and he seated himself.

"Mebbe," was all he said, in a dubious voice, and with his head bowed on his breast.

He did not lift his head, when Mose shook hands with him; he did not raise his glance to follow him, either, when, with the traps and frying-pan clattering about his neck, Mose let himself out by the shed door and was gone.

He did not even seem to hear when, two or three minutes later, the reverberating crack of revolver shots – one! two! three! four! five! – set the echoes clamoring all around the Whipple house.

CHAPTER V.
THE DEPUTY MARSHAL

As soon as Job Parshall heard the sound of firearms outside the Whipple cabin, he darted to the nearer of the front windows, scratched away some of the thick frost from one of its panes, and put his eye to the aperture.

A horse and cutter had come to a halt on the road, a few rods short of the house. The animal had been frightened by the firing, and was still showing signs of excitement, with lifted ears and stiffened forelegs.

The man, whom Job understood to be Moak, stood at the horse's head, holding the bridle tightly, but looking intently the other way across the fields in the direction of his companion, the redoubtable deputy marshal, who was not in sight.

The boy stole to the other end of the room, and cautiously opened the shed door by as much as the width of his face. Here he could cover at a glance the flat, gently sloping waste of snow which stretched unbroken backward from the house to the gray fringe of woods that marked the edge of the ravine. Beyond that belt of timbered horizon, with its shadows silvery soft in the brilliant morning sunlight, lay sunken in its hollow the ice-bound brook.

If Mose passed this stream there was before him the real forest – and safety.

The black figures of two running men moved upon this broad and dazzlingly white landscape. The farther of the two was now so far away that he seemed a mere dark speck, like the object seen from the gun-line of a turkey shoot. Perhaps this simile was suggested to Job by the fact that the other, pausing now for a moment in his race, straightened an arm and sent five more shots flashing after the fugitive.

Tenfold that number of echoes came rolling in upon one another's heels through the nipping air as the second man started again to run. He seemed not to be catching up with his prey – yes! now Mose was lost to sight in the woods, and his pursuer was not half-way there. Yes! and now the marshal had stopped, hesitated, and turned about.

The deputy marshal retraced his steps over the broken crust slowly, and with an air of dejection. He hung his head as he walked, and it took him a long time to reach the house. When he came into the yard he seemed not to look toward the house at all, but made his way straight past as if bound for the road, with his attention still steadfastly fixed on the snow in front of him.

But just as Job had jumped to the conclusion that he had not been observed, the deputy marshal called in a loud, peremptory aside over his shoulder: —

"Come along out here, boy!"

The lad had no course but to obey. He stole a quick, backward glance to where old Asa still sat motionless with bowed head near the stove. Then noiselessly shutting the shed door behind him, he

followed out into the road.

"It'll be all right," the deputy marshal was saying to his companion as Job came up. "He can't take a step on this crust without leavin' a mark, 'specially now that it's goin' to melt a little. I'll land him in the stone jug before night, or you can call me a Dutchman!"

Norman Hazzard, the deputy marshal, was a thin, lithe, active man, somewhere in the thirties, with a long, sun-browned face and a square jaw. Although his keen eyes were of a light, bluish gray, one thought of him as a dark-complexioned person.

Ever since Job could remember, this man had been arresting people, first as a sheriff's officer, then as an army detective. Looking furtively at him now as he stood at the horse's head, with his sharp glance roving the distant landscape and his under lip nursing the ends of his sparse moustache in meditation, the boy felt that that was what nature intended that Norm Hazzard should be.

The whole country knew him by sight, and talked about the risky things he had done in the line of his duty, and the stern, cold-blooded pluck with which he had done them.

As the deputy marshal stood thus pondering the situation, he rattled together with his hand some heavy metallic objects in one of his overcoat pockets. The clanking sound they gave forth fascinated the boy.

"I s'pose them's handcuffs you've got there in your pocket?" he found himself suddenly impelled to remark. It was only after

the words were out that he realized the boldness of speaking in this fierce presence without having been spoken to.

Hazzard turned his head obliquely downward, and regarded Job with a sort of ironical scowl.

"They ain't for you, anyway," he remarked. "I guess the horsewhip'll about suit *your* complaint."

"No, you don't!" replied Job. "You dassent lay a finger on me unless I've done something – I know that much."

The deputy marshal emitted a chuckle of amused contempt.

"Why, you blamed little runt, you!" he said. "You've done mischief enough this mornin' to git thrashed for it within an inch o' your life, and go to state's prison into the bargain. You mind your p's and q's now mighty sharp, or it'll be the end o' you!"

"I don't see, myself," put in Moak, a bearded, thickset, middle-aged man, who drawled his words lazily, but looked as if he might be a tough customer in a fight, "I don't jest make out how you're goin' to catch up with him, even if he does leave tracks. He's got a big start, and has pretty good reasons for humpin' himself, and if he can keep ahead till dark, he knows the woods in the night-time a plaguy sight better'n any of us do."

Hazzard curled his lips in a faint, momentary grin of superiority.

"Can't we get snow-shoes?" he asked.

The word had an evil sound to Job's ears. They would run Mose down, sure enough, with those terrible aids to the pursuit.

"The only question is," the deputy marshal ruminated aloud,

"where'll be the nearest place to git the shoes. We'll hitch the horse here to the fence, and take a look at the house. Did you ever see such a tumble-down place in all your life? Here, you boy, mog along there in front o' me, and watch what you do! Or no, wait a minute!"

The deputy marshal had led the horse off the roadway toward the sprawling remains of a rail fence at the side. He paused now, communed with himself for an instant, then brought the horse and cutter back again, and tossed the blanket he had taken out upon the seat once more.

"No," he said briefly to Moak, "you jump in and drive to Juno Mills as fast as you can, and git two pairs of snow-shoes somewhere, – you're bound to find plenty of 'em; the hotel-keeper'll know who's got 'em, – and race back here again. Don't whisper a word to anybody – and we'll have him out in no time."

So it happened that as the cutter with its jingling bells receded from vision and hearing down the road, Job Parshall found himself marching back in embarrassed state toward the front door of the Whipple house, with the firm tread of the deputy marshal crunching on the snow close at his heels.

He could catch the sinister rattle of those handcuffs in Hazzard's pocket at every stride the man took. He tried not to dwell upon it in his mind, but it was a fact that Norm Hazzard had killed two men, one of them a member of a famous local gang of horse-thieves, whom he had shot where he was ambushed behind the grain bags in his barn, the other a wife-murderer, who had

escaped from jail to the woods.

How was it, Job wondered, that he had missed all ten of his shots at Mose? Perhaps they were not all misses. Men did run sometimes, it was said, after they had been struck by a bullet. What if Mose, after all, was lying there, somewhere in the woods, wounded and helpless in the bitter cold!

The manacles behind him ground together with a cruel, rasping noise as this picture rose in his brain.

He pushed the door wide open and went in, closely followed by the other.

Old Asa sat where he had left him, his tall frame settled down supinely in the armchair, his head bent on his breast, motionless and apparently asleep.

"Here's somebody to see you, Asa," Job said, as he heard the door close behind him; but the old man did not stir.

The deputy marshal walked forward, brusquely pushing the lad aside, and laid a heavy hand on Asa Whipple's shoulder. He paused then, as if puzzled by what his grasp felt. Then he put his other hand, not so ungently, into the old man's beard and lifted his head up.

"Say! I wasn't figurin' on this!" was his bewildered exclamation. "Here, quick, you! run and bring some water. Maybe it's only a faint."

This indeed it turned out to be – a deep swoon, the result of long privation and weakness, accented by the sudden relief and the subsequent strain of excitement.

Hazzard could not rouse the old man from his comatose lethargy, with all his rubbing and slapping of hands, and liberal use of snow upon the temple and lips. But he did satisfy himself that there was no imminent danger, and he went to work to spread out the bed again behind the stove, loosen old Asa's clothes, and stretch him out to sleep at his ease, comfortably tucked in with Hazzard's own overcoat, which the marshal had stripped off for the purpose, quite as if his mission in life had been to nurse rather than arrest people.

He had taken out of the overcoat pocket, before spreading it across the bed, a big navy revolver, a parcel or two, presumably of ammunition, and a couple of curious steel wristlets, linked together with a chain; Job looked at these latter, as they lay on the table, with profound interest.

Job had never seen handcuffs so near, and he longed to ask the great man to show him how they worked. Finally, after he had obeyed his curt instruction to put more wood on the fire, and the deputy marshal had seated himself by the stove with his feet balanced on a stick just inside the oven door, and a pipe in his mouth, Job ventured to lift the manacles from the table and inspect them.

As this passed without protest he went to the length of opening one of the bands on its hinge, and then shutting it about his wrist. The two parts went together with a clicking snap, and the boy, after a few fruitless efforts to open them or to slip his hand through, began to guess that he would have to ask the help of the

deputy marshal to release him.

He would not humble himself thus, however, before it was a matter of sheer necessity; and he tugged away at the lock in dogged silence, until his wrist was red and sore. The consciousness that the official was grinning at him only made the thing worse.

"If I'd had the sense to do that myself," remarked Hazzard after a time, "when I first laid eyes on you this morning, and then nailed the chain up to the barn door-post, I'd have saved myself a heap of trouble. Leave it alone, or you'll swell your wrist out o' shape. I'll unlock it bimeby – maybe."

He smoked silently for a minute, dividing his ruminative gaze between the steaming leather in the oven, and the rueful countenance of the boy in the handcuffs.

"You're Hank Parshall's boy, ain't you?" he asked at last.

Job nodded and held his imprisoned hand forth to hint, without saying, that he had had enough of the handcuff.

The other paid no heed to the gesture. "What's the matter with the old man, here?" he inquired with a downward nod.

"He ain't had enough to eat," said Job, bluntly. "That's what's the matter with him. He told me himself he laid down there last night to starve to death."

Mr. Hazzard pointed a thumb to the greasy frying-pan, and the remains of the chicken on the table beside Job.

"People don't go to work that way to starve," he commented dryly.

"Mose brought him that – I guess I know pretty well where he got it, too. The old man allowed that that was what saved his life. They hadn't been a soul near him before since the snowfall – and he laid up. Oh, that reminds me!" Job finished by taking the two slices of bread from his pocket, and putting them on the table.

"Bring that for the old man?" queried the deputy marshal.

Job shook his head.

"No, it's my own breakfast. I was goin' to give it to Mose," he replied stoutly. "Say, take this thing off, won't you?"

Norm Hazzard laughed outright. "No!" he said. "Guess after that I'll have to put the other one onto you, too." His tone lapsed to seriousness as he went on: "Maybe you know somethin' about it – didn't I hear that this Mose Whipple went to the war as substitute for your man – Teachout?"

"Yes, sir, he did – and Teachout didn't give him not a dollar, but jest let it go on to the mortgage, and he promised to look out for old Asa here, and he didn't – and he'd begrudge him this bread here, if he knew it."

The deputy marshal nodded comprehendingly, and blew the smoke through his pipe.

"Charged me and Moak thirty-five cents apiece for our breakfasts this mornin', and twenty cents for the horse," he said, in a musing tone. "Reckon he's about the tightest old skinflint on the whole turnpike – and that's sayin' a good deal. So he got drafted, did he? Should 'a' thought he was too old."

"He ain't as old as he looks," explained Job. "He's a good deal

meaner, though. I'm glad o' one thing, anyway. I ain't goin' back there any more, except to git my clothes and my money. I'm goin' to live in here with the old man, and kind o' look after him. I promised – "

"Promised Mose, eh?" broke in the deputy marshal.

"Yes – if you want to know – I did promise Mose! You can't touch me for that!"

"Why, that's skinnin' alive, that is – jest for that alone," said Hazzard, with portentous gravity, "to say nothin' of scootin' over here to give warnin', and bringin' that bread there in your pocket, and so on. Why, it'll puzzle a Philadelphy lawyer to find punishments bad enough for you."

Job looked him searchingly in the eye for a full minute, then held up the fettered hand again.

"Say, unlock this, will you?" he said, unabashed. "I knew you was foolin' all the time," he added, as the other produced the key from his pocket and turned the lock. "I could tell it right from the start."

"Me? me foolin'?" asked Hazzard, with simulated surprise. "Why, you're crazy, boy!"

"No, I spotted it right off," Job replied, eager to put into words the idea that had suddenly come to him. "Why, anybody could tell that. A sure-enough dead shot like you wouldn't fire ten shots at a man and not hit him once, if he wasn't foolin'. It was as plain as the nose on your face – you didn't really want to catch poor Mose. That's what made me take a shine to you, right off."

Norman Hazzard blew more smoke through his pipe, and grinned to himself, and even gave an abrupt little laugh aloud, shifting on the instant to an air of grave imperturbability.

"You mustn't talk like that – that is, outside," he said. "It might give folks wrong notions. Besides, I tell you you're mistaken. I never fired more to kill in all my life. But of course – the old man here – p'r'aps that does make it a little different."

He looked down as he spoke to where old Asa lay, under the overcoat, and Job felt sure that there was a change on his face – a change toward kindliness.

"Well, anyway," the boy persisted, "you wouldn't fire to kill now, if you was to catch up to Mose, and what's more, I don't believe you're goin' to try to catch up to him, neither."

"I ain't, eh?" broke in the deputy marshal. "You wait till Moak gets back with the snow-shoes. We'll run him down in no time. He ain't got no more chance than a lame mud-turtle."

The words sounded savage enough, and Job, scanning the lean, tanned face of the speaker, found his mind conjuring up again visions of those two other wrong-doers whom this hunter of men had shot down.

And yet, somehow, there seemed to be a sort of relenting twinkle in those sharp, cold, gray eyes of his.

CHAPTER VI.
A HOME IN THE WOODS

The pursuit of Mose Whipple had to be postponed, as it turned out, whether the deputy marshal relented or not.

It was late, for one thing, before Moak returned from his quest after snow-shoes, and what was worse, he came back empty-handed. He had driven about, over and through the drifted roads, for miles, directed by local rumors and surmise, to one after another of the isolated farm-houses scattered over the district, but had found no snow-shoes.

He was too cold and stiff, and too much annoyed with the day's experiences, to listen to any further delay, but sat doggedly in the sleigh, out on the road in front of the Whipple house, until the deputy marshal, followed by Job, came out to him.

"No, I ain't goin' to get out again, Norm," he said querulously. "I've had enough of this fool's errand. I'm froze solid now in one position, and I'm gittin' used to it. I don't want to climb out and limber up, and then have to freeze stiff all over again in some new shape. Just you give it up for a bad job, and come along. We can get to Octavius by supper-time if we look sharp."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.