

A Bird Out of the Snare

Dorothy Canfield

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AFTER the bargain was completed and the timber merchant had gone away, Jehiel Hawthorn walked stiffly to the pine tree and put his horny old fist against it, looking up to its spreading top with an expression of hostile exultation in his face. The neighbor who had been called to witness the transfer of Jehiel's woodland looked at him curiously.

"That was quite a sight of money to come in without your expectin', wa'n't it?" he said, fumbling awkwardly for an opening to the question he burned to ask.

Jehiel did not answer. The two old men stood silent, looking down the valley, lying like a crevasse in a glacier between the towering white mountains. The sinuous course of the frozen river was almost black under the slaty sky of March.

"Seems kind o' providential, havin' so much money come to you just now, when your sister-in-law's jest died, and left you the first time in your life without anybody you got to stay and see to, don't it?" commented the neighbor persistently.

Jehiel made a vague sign with his head.

"I s'pose likely you'll be startin' aout to travel and see foreign parts, same's you've always planned, won't you — or maybe you cal'late you be too old now?"

Jehiel gave no indication that he had heard. His faded old blue eyes were fixed steadily on the single crack in the rampart of mountains, through which the afternoon train was just now leaving the valley. Its whistle echoed back hollowly, as it fled away from the prison walls into the great world.

The neighbor stiffened in offended pride. "I bid you good-night, Mr. Hawthorn," he said severely, and stumped down the steep, narrow road leading to the highway in the valley.

After he had disappeared Jehiel turned to the tree and leaned his forehead against it. He was so still he seemed a part of the great pine. He stood so till the piercing chill of evening chilled him through, and when he looked again about him it was after he had lived his life all through in a brief and bitter review.

It began with the tree and it ended with the tree, and in spite of the fever of unrest in his heart it was as stationary as any rooted creature of the woods. When he was eleven and his father went away to the Civil War, he had watched him out of sight with no sorrow, only a burning envy of the wanderings that lay before the soldier. A little later, when it was decided that he should go to stay with his married sister, since she was left alone by her husband's departure to the war, he turned his back on his home with none of a child's usual reluctance, but with an eager delight in the day-long drive to the other end of the valley. That was the longest journey he had ever taken, the man of almost three-score thought, with an aching resentment against Fate.

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Still, those years with his sister, filled with labor beyond his age as they were, had been the happiest of his life. In an almost complete isolation the two had toiled together five years, the most impressionable of his life; and all his affection centred on the silent, loving, always comprehending sister. His own father and mother grew to seem far away and alien, and his sister came to be like a part of himself. To her alone of all living souls had he spoken freely of his passion for adventuring far from home, of the lust for wandering which devoured his boy-soul. He was sixteen when her husband finally came back from the war, and he had no secrets from the young matron of twenty-six, who listened with such wide tender eyes of sympathy to his half-frantic outpourings of longing to escape from the dark, narrow valley where his fathers had lived their dark, narrow lives.

The day before he went back to his own home, now so strange to him, he was out with her, searching for some lost turkey-chicks, and found one with its foot caught in a tangle of rusty wire. The little creature had beaten itself almost to death in its struggle to get way. Kneeling in the grass, and feeling the wild palpitations of its heart under his rescuing hand, he had called to his sister, "Oh, look! Poor thing! It's 'most dead, and yet it ain't really hurt a mite, only desperate, over bein' held fast." His voice broke in a sudden wave of sympathy: "Oh, ain't it terrible to feel so!"

For a moment the young mother put her little son aside and looked at her brother with brooding eyes. A little later she said with apparent irrelevance, "Jehiel, as soon as you're a man grown, I'll help you to get off. You shall be a sailor, if you like, and go around the world, and bring back coral to baby and me."

A chilling premonition fell on the lad. "I don't believe it!" he said, with tears in his eyes. "I just believe I've got to stay here in this hole all my life."

His sister looked off at the tops of the trees. Finally, "Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler," she quoted dreamily.

When she came to see him and their parents a few months later, she brought him a little square of crimson silk, on which she had worked in tiny stitches, "Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler." She explained to her father and mother that it was a "text-ornament" for Jehiel to hang up over his desk; but she drew the boy aside and showed him that the silk was only lightly caught down to the foundation.

"Underneath is another text," she said, "and when your day of freedom comes I want you should promise me to cut the stitches, turn back the silk, and take the second text for your motto, so you'll remember to be properly grateful. This is the second text." She put her hands on his shoulders and said in a loud, exultant voice, "My soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler. The snare is broken and I am escaped."

For answer the boy pulled her eagerly to the window and pointed to a young pine tree that stood near the house.

"Sister, that tree's just as old as I be. I've prayed to God, and I've promised myself that before it's as tall as the ridge-pole of the house, I'll be on my way."

As this scene came before his eyes, the white-haired man, leaning against the great pine, looked up at the lofty crown of green wreathing the giant's head and shook his fist at it. He hated every inch of its height, for every inch meant an enforced renunciation that had brought him bitterness and a sense of failure.

His sister had died the year after she had given him the double text, and his father the year after that. He was left thus, the sole support of his ailing mother, who transferred to the silent, sullen boy the irresistible rule of complaining weakness with which she had governed his father. It was thought she could not live long, and the boy stood in terror of a sudden death brought on by displeasure at some act of his. In the end, however, she died quietly in her bed, an old woman of seventy-three, nursed by her daughter-in-law, the widow of Jehiel's only brother. Her place in the house was taken by Jehiel's sister-in-law, a sickly, helpless woman, alone in the world

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except for Jehiel, and all the neighbors congratulated him on having a housekeeper ready to his hand. He said nothing.

By that time, indeed, he had sunk into a harsh and repellent silence on all topics. He went through the exhausting routine of farming with an iron-like endurance, watched with set lips the morning and afternoon trains leave the valley, and noted the growth of the pine tree with a burning heart. His only recreation was collecting time-tables, prospectuses of steamship companies, and what few books of travel he could afford. The only society he did not shun was that of itinerant peddlers or tramps, and occasionally a returned missionary on a lecture tour.

And always the pine tree had grown, insolent in the pride of a creature set in the right surroundings. The imprisoned man had felt himself dwarfed by its height. But now, he looked up at it again, and laughed aloud. It had come late, but it had come. He was fifty-seven years old, almost three-score, but all his life was still to be lived. He said to himself that some folks lived their lives while they did their work, but he had done all his tasks first, and now he could live. The unexpected arrival of the timber merchant and the sale of that piece of land he'd never thought would bring him a cent — was not that an evident sign that Providence was with him? He was too old and broken now to work his way about as he had planned at first, but here had come this six hundred dollars like rain from the sky. He would start as soon as he could sell his stock.

The thought reminded him of his evening chores, and he set off for the barn with a harsh jubilation that it was almost the last time he would need to milk. How far, he wondered, could he go on that money? He hurried through his work and into the house to his old desk. The faded text-ornament stood on the top shelf, but he did not see it, as he hastily tumbled out all the time-tables and sailing-lists. The habit of looking at them with the yearning bitterness of unreconciled deprivation was still so strong on him that even as he handled them eagerly, he hated them for the associations of years of misery they brought back to him.

Where should he go? He was dazed by the unlimited possibilities before him. To Boston first, as the nearest seaport. He had taken the trip in his mind so many times that he knew the exact minute when the train would cross the state line and he would be really escaped from the net which had bound him all his life. From Boston to Jamaica as the nearest place that was quite, quite different from Vermont. He had no desire to see Europe or England. Life there was too much like what he had known. He wanted to be in a country where nothing should remind him of his past. From Jamaica where? His stiff old fingers painfully traced out a steamship line to the Isthmus and thence to Colombia. He knew nothing about that country. All the better. It would be the more foreign. Only this he knew, that nobody in that tropical country "farmed it," and that was where he wanted to go. From Colombia around the Cape to Argentina. He was aghast at the cost, but instantly decided that he would go steerage. There would be more real foreigners to be seen that way, and his money would go twice as far.

To Buenos Ayres, then. He did not even attempt to pronounce this name, though its strange, inexplicable look on the page was a joy to him. From there by mule-back and afoot over the Andes to Chile. He knew something about that trip. A woman who had taught in the Methodist missionary school in Santiago de Chile had taken that journey, and he had heard her give a lecture on it. He was the sexton of the church and heard all the lectures free. At Santiago de Chile (he pronounced it with a strange distortion of the schoolteacher's bad accent) he would stay for a while and just live and decide what to do next. His head swam with dreams and visions, and his heart thumped heavily against his old ribs. The clock striking ten brought him back to reality. He stood up with a gesture of exultation almost fierce. "That's just the time when the train crosses the state line!" he said.

He slept hardly at all that night, waking with great starts, and imagining himself in strange foreign places, and then recognizing with a scornful familiarity the worn old pieces of furniture in his room. He noticed at these times that it was very cold, and lifelong habit made him reflect that he would better go early to the church because it would be hard to get up steam enough to warm the building before time for service. After he had finished his morning chores and was about to start he noticed that the thermometer stood at four above zero.

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That was certainly winter temperature; the snow lay like a heavy shroud on all the dead valley, but the strange, blind instinct of a man who has lived close to the earth stirred within him. He looked at the sky and the mountains and put out his bare palm. "I shouldn't be surprised if the spring break-up was near," he said. "I guess this is about the last winter day we'll get."

The church was icy cold, and he toiled in the cellar, stuffing wood into the flaming maw of the steam-heater, till it was time to ring the bell. As he gave the last stroke, Deacon Bradley approached him. "Jehiel, I've got a little job of repairing I want you should do at my store," he said in the loud, slow speech of a man important in the community. "Come to the store to-morrow morning and see about it." He passed on into his pew, which was at the back of the church near a steam radiator, so that he was warm, no matter what the weather was.

Jehiel Hawthorn went out and stood on the front steps in the winter sunshine and his heart swelled exultingly as he looked across at the deacon's store. "I wish I'd had time to tell him I'd do no repairs for him to-morrow, nor any time — that I'm going to travel and see the world."

The last comers disappeared in the church and the sound of singing came faintly to Jehiel's ears. Although he was the sexton he rarely was in church for the service, using his duties as an excuse for absence. He felt that it was not for him to take part in prayer and thanksgiving. As a boy he had prayed for the one thing he wanted, and what had it come to?

A penetrating cold wind swept around the corner and he turned to go inside to see about the steam-pipes. In the outer hall he noticed that the service had progressed to the responsive readings. As he opened the door of the church the minister read rapidly, "Praised be the Lord who hath not given us over for a prey unto their teeth."

The congregation responded in a timid inarticulate gabble, above which rose Deacon Bradley's loud voice, — "Our soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler. The snare is broken and we are escaped." He read the responses in a slow, booming roar, at least half a sentence behind the rest, but the minister always waited for him. As he finished, he saw the sexton standing in the open door. "A little more steam, Jehiel," he added commandingly, running the words on to the end of the text.

Jehiel turned away silently, but as he stumbled through the dark, unfinished part of the cellar he thought to himself, "Well, that's the last time he'll give me an order for one while!"

Then the words of the text he had heard came back to his mind with a half-superstitious shock at the coincidence. He had forgotten all about that hidden part of the text-ornament. Why, now that had come true! He ought to have cut the stitches and torn off the old text last night. He would, as soon as he went home. He wished his sister were alive to know, and suddenly, there in the dark, he wondered if perhaps she did know.

As he passed the door to the rooms of the Ladies' Auxiliary Society he noticed that it was ajar, and saw through the crack that there was a sleeping figure on the floor near the stove — a boy about sixteen. When Jehiel stepped softly in and looked at him, the likeness to his own sister struck him even before he recognized the lad as his great-nephew, the son of the child he had helped his sister to care for all those years ago.

"Why, what's Nathaniel doin' here?" he asked himself in surprise. He had not known that the boy was even in town, for he had been on the point of leaving to enlist in the navy. Family matters could not have detained him, for he was quite alone in the world, since both his father and his mother were dead and his stepmother had married again. Under his great-uncle's gaze the lad opened his eyes with a start and sat up confused. "What's the matter with you, Nat?" asked the older man not ungently. He was thinking that probably he had looked like that at sixteen. The boy stared at him a moment, and then, leaning his head on a chair, he began to cry. Sitting thus, crouched together, he looked like a child.

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"Why, Natty, what's the trouble?" asked his uncle, alarmed.

"I came off here because I couldn't hold in at home any longer," answered the other between sobs. "You see I can't go away. Her husband treats her so bad she can't stay with him. I don't blame her, she says she just can't! So she's come back and she ain't well, and she's goin' to have a baby, and I've got to stay and support her. Mr. Bradley's offered me a place in his store and I've got to give up goin' to the navy." He suddenly realized the unmanliness of his attitude, rose to his feet, closing his lips tightly, and faced the older man with a resolute expression of despair in his young eyes.

"Uncle Jehiel, it does seem to me I can't have it so! All my life I've looked forward to bein' a sailor and goin' around the world, and all. I just hate the valley and the mountains! But I guess I got to stay. She's only my step-mother, I know, but she was always awful good to me, and she hasn't got anybody else to look after her." His voice broke, and he put his arm up in a crook over his face. "But it's awful hard! I feel like a bird that's got caught in a snare."

His uncle had grown very pale during this speech, and at the last words he recoiled with an exclamation of horror. There was a silence in which he looked at his nephew with the wide eyes of a man who sees a spectre. Then he turned away into the furnace-room, and picking up his lunch-box brought it back. "Here, you," he said, roughly, "part of what's troublin' you is that you ain't had any breakfast. You eat this and you'll feel better. I'll be back in a minute."

He went away blindly into the darkest part of the cellar. It was very black there, but his eyes stared wide before him. It was very cold, but drops of sweat stood on his forehead as if he were in the hayfield. He was alone, but his lips moved from time to time, and once he called out in some loud, stifled exclamation which resounded hollowly in the vault-like place. He was there a long time.

When he went back into the furnace cellar, he found Nathaniel sitting before the fire. The food and warmth had brought a little color into his pale face, but it was still set in a mask of tragic desolation.

As his uncle came in, he exclaimed,

"Why, Uncle Jehiel, you look awful bad. Are you sick?"

"Yes, I be," said the other harshly, "but 't ain't nothin'. It'll pass after a while. Nathaniel, I've thought of a way you can manage. You know your uncle's wife died this last week and that leaves me without any housekeeper. What if your stepmother sh'd come and take care of me and I'll take care of her. I've just sold a piece of timber land I never thought to get a cent out of, and that'll ease things up so we can hire help if she ain't strong enough to do the work."

Nathaniel's face flushed in a relief which died quickly down to a sombre hopelessness. He faced his uncle doggedly. "Not much, Uncle Jehiel!" he said heavily. "I ain't agoin' to hear to such a thing. I know all about your wantin' to get away from the valley — you take that money and go yourself and I'll —"

Hopelessness and resolution were alike struck out of his face by the fury of benevolence with which the old man cut him short. "Don't you dare to speak a word against it, boy!" cried Jehiel in a labored anguish. "Good Lord! I'm only doin' it for you because I have to! I've been through what you're layin' out for yourself an' stood it, somehow, an' now I'm 'most done with it all. But 'twould be like beginnin' it all again to see you startin' in."

The boy tried to speak, but he raised his voice. "No, I couldn't stand it all over again. 'Twould cut in to the places where I've got calloused." Seeing through the other's stupor the beginnings of an irresolute opposition, he flung himself upon him in a strange and incredible appeal, crying out, "Oh, you must! You got to go!" commanding and

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imploring in the same incoherent sentence, struggling for speech, and then hanging on Nathaniel's answer in a sudden wild silence. It was as though his next breath depended on the boy's decision.

It was very still in the twilight where they stood. The faint murmur of a prayer came down from above, and while it lasted both were as though held motionless by its mesmeric monotony. Then at the boom of the organ, the lad's last shred of self-control vanished. He burst again into muffled weary sobs, the light from the furnace glistening redly on his streaming cheeks. "It ain't right, Uncle Jehiel. I feel as though I was murderin' somethin'! But I can't help it. I'll go, I'll do as you say, but — "

His uncle's agitation went out like a wind-blown flame. He, too, drooped in an utter fatigue. "Never mind, Natty," he said tremulously, "it'll all come out right somehow. Just you do as Uncle Jehiel says."

A trampling upstairs told him that the service was over. "You run home now and tell her I'll be over this afternoon to fix things up."

He hurried up the stairs to open the front doors, but Deacon Bradley was before him. "You're late, Jehiel," he said severely, "and the church was cold."

"I know, Deacon," said the sexton humbly, "but it won't happen again. And I'll be around the first thing in the morning to do that job for you." His voice sounded dull and lifeless.

"What's the matter?" asked the deacon. "Be you sick?"

"Yes, I be, but 't ain't nothin'. 'Twill pass after a while."

That evening, as he walked home after service, he told himself that he had never known so long a day. It seemed longer than all the rest of his life. Indeed he felt that some strange and racking change had come upon him since the morning, as though he were not the same person, as though he had been away on a long journey, and saw all things with changed eyes.

"I feel as though I'd died," he thought with surprise, "and was dead and buried."

This brought back to his mind the only bitter word he had spoken throughout the endless day. Nathaniel had said as an excuse for his haste (Jehiel insisted on his leaving that night), "You see, mother, it's really a service to Uncle Jehiel, since he's got nobody to keep house for him." He had added in the transparent self-justification of selfish youth, "And I'll pay it back to him every cent." At this Jehiel had said shortly, "By the time you can pay it back what I'll need most will be a tombstone. Git a big one so's to keep me down there quiet."

But now, walking home under the frosty stars, he felt very quiet already, as though he needed no weight to lie heavy on his restless heart. It did not seem restless now, but very still, as though it too were dead. He noticed that the air was milder, and as he crossed the bridge below his house he stopped and listened. Yes, the fine ear of his experience caught a faint grinding sound. By to-morrow the river would begin to break up. It was the end of winter. He surprised himself by his pleasure in thinking of the spring.

Before he went into the house after his evening chores were done, he stopped for a moment and looked back at the cleft in the mountain wall through which the railroad left the valley. He had been looking longingly toward that door of escape all his life, and now he said good-bye to it. "Ah well, 'twan't to be," he said, with an accent of weary finality; but then, suddenly out of the chill which oppressed his heart there sprang a last searing blast of astonished anguish. It was as if he realized for the first time all that had befallen him since the morning. He was racked by a horrified desolation that made his sturdy old body stagger as if under an unexpected blow. As he reeled he flung his arm about the pine tree and so stood for a time, shaking in a paroxysm which left him

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breathless when it passed.

For it passed as suddenly as it came. He lifted his head and looked again at the great cleft in the mountains, with new eyes. Somehow, insensibly, his heart had been emptied of its fiery draught by more than mere exhaustion. The old bitter pain was gone, but there was no mere void in its place. He felt the sweet, weak light-headedness of a man in his first lucid period after a fever, tears stinging his eyelids in confused thanksgiving for an unrecognized respite from pain.

He looked up at the lofty crown of the pine tree, through which shone one or two of the brightest stars, and felt a new comradeship with it. It was a great tree, he thought, and they had grown up together. He laid his hardened palm on it, and fancied that he caught a throb of the silent vitality under the bark. How many kinds of life there were! Under its white shroud, how all the valley lived. The tree stretching up its head to the stars, the river preparing to throw off the icy armor which compressed its heart — they were all awakening in their own way. The river had been restless, like himself, the tree had been tranquil, but they passed together through the resurrection into quiet life.

When he went into the house, he found that he was almost fainting with fatigue. He sat down by the desk, and his head fell forward on the pile of pamphlets he had left there. For the first time in his life he thought of them without a sore heart. "I suppose Natty'll go to every one of them places," he murmured as he dropped to sleep.

He dreamed strange, troubled dreams that melted away before he could seize on them, and finally he thought his sister stood before him and called. The impression was so vivid that he started up, staring at the empty room. For an instant he still thought he heard a voice, and then he knew it was the old clock striking the hour. It was ten o'clock.

"Natty's just a-crossin' the state line," he said aloud.

The text-ornament caught his eye. Still half asleep, with his sister's long-forgotten voice ringing in his ears, he remembered vaguely that he had meant to bring the second text to light. For a moment he hesitated, and then, "Well, it's come true for Natty, anyhow," he thought.

And clumsily using his heavy jack-knife, he began to cut the tiny stitches which had so long hidden from his eyes the joyous exultation of the escaped prisoner.