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Winston Churchill

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THAT night I climbed carefully out of the window, and so down the corner of the house to the ground. It was starlight, and a waning moon hung in the sky. I made my way through the drive between the black shadows of the forest, and came at length to the big gates at the entrance, locked for the night. A strange thought of their futility struck me as I climbed the rail fence beside them, and pushed on into the main road, the mud sucking under my shoes as I went. I must have walked two hours or more before I came to the mire of a cross−road, and there I stood in a quandary of doubt as to which side led to Charlestown.

As I lingered a light began to tremble in the heavens. A cock crew in the distance. I sat down on a fallen log to rest. But presently, as the light grew, I heard shouts which drew nearer and deeper and brought me to my feet in an uncertainty of expectation. Next came the rattling of chains, the scramble of hoofs in the mire, and here was a wagon with a big canvas cover. Beside the straining horses was a great, burly man with a red beard, cracking his long whip, and calling to the horses in a strange 59 tongue. He stopped still beside his panting animals when he saw me, his high boots sunk in the mud.

"Gut morning, poy," he said, wiping his red face with his sleeve; "what you do here?"

"I am going to Charlestown," I answered.

"Ach!" he cried, "dot is pad. Mein poy, he run avay. You are ein gut poy, I know. I vill pay ein gut price to help me vit mein wagon — ja."

"Where are you going?" I demanded, with a sudden wavering.

"Up country — pack country. You know der Proad River — yes?"

No, I did not. But a longing came upon me for the old backwoods life, with its freedom and self−reliance, and a hatred for this steaming country of heat and violent storms.

And so I went with him, and spent the time on the whole happily with this Dutchman, whose name was Hans Koppel. He talked merrily save when he spoke of the war against England, and then contemptuously, for he was a bitter English partisan. And in contrast to this he would dwell for hours on a king he called Friedrich 60 der Grosse, and a war he waged that was a war; and how this mighty king had fought a mighty queen at Rossbach and Leuthen in his own country, — battles that were battles.

"And you were there, Hans?" I asked him once.

"Ja," he said, "but I did not stay."

"You ran away?"

"Ja," Hans would answer, laughing, "run avay. I love peace, Tavid. Dot is vy I come here, and now," bitterly, "and now ve haf var again once."

I would say nothing; but I must have looked my disapproval, for he went on to explain that in Saxe−Gotha, where he was born, men were made to fight whether they would or no; and they were stolen from their wives at night by soldiers of the great king, or lured away by fair promises.

Travelling with incredible slowness, in due time we came to a county called Orangeburg, where all were Dutchmen like Hans, and very few spoke English. And they all thought like Hans, and loved peace, and hated the Congress. On Sundays, as we lay over at the taverns, these would be filled with a rollicking crowd of fiddlers and dancers, quaintly dressed, the women bringing their children and babies. At such times Hans would be drunk, and I would have to feed the tired horses and mount watch over the cargo. And at length we came to Hans's farm, in a prettily rolling country on the Broad River. Hans's wife spoke no English at all, nor did the brood of children running about the house. I had small fancy for staying in such a place, and so Hans paid me two crowns for my three weeks' service; I think, with real regret, for labor was scarce in those parts, and though I was young, I knew

how to work. And I could at least have guided his plough in the furrow and cared for his cattle.

For the convenience of travellers passing that way, Hans kept a tavern, — if it could have been dignified by such a 61 name. It was in truth merely a log house with shakedowns, and stood across the rude road from his log farmhouse. And he gave me leave to sleep there and to work for my board until I cared to leave. It so chanced that on the second day after my arrival a pack−train came along, guided by a nettlesome old man and a strong, black−haired lass of sixteen or thereabouts. The old man, whose name was Ripley, wore a nut−brown hunting shirt trimmed with red cotton; and he had no sooner slipped the packs from his horses than he began to rail at Hans, who stood looking on.

"You damned Dutchmen be all Tories, and worse," he cried; "you stay here and till your farms while our boys are off in the hill towns fighting Cherokees. I wish the devils had every one of your fat sculps. Polly Ann, water the nags."

Hans replied to this sally with great vigor, lapsing into Dutch. Polly Ann led the scrawny ponies to the trough, but her eyes snapped with merriment as she listened. She was a wonderfully comely lass, despite her loose cotton gown and poke−bonnet and the shoepacks on her feet. She had blue eyes, the whitest, strongest of teeth, and the rosiest of faces.

"Gran'pa hates a Dutchman wuss'n pizen," she said to me. "So do I. We've all been burned out and sculped up river — and they never give us so much as a man or a measure of corn."

I helped her feed the animals, and tether them, and loose their bells for the night, and carry the packs under cover.

"All the boys is gone to join Rutherford and lam the Indians," she continued, "so Gran'pa and I had to go to the settlements. There wahn't any one else. What's your name?" she demanded suddenly.

I told her.

She sat down on a log at the corner of the house, and pulled me down beside her.

"And whar be you from?"

I told her. It was impossible to look into her face and 62 not tell her. She listened eagerly, now with compassion, and now showing her white teeth in amusement. And when I had done, much to my discomfiture, she seized me in her strong arms and kissed me.

"Poor Davy," she cried, "you ain't got a home. You shall come home with us."

Catching me by the hand, she ran like a deer across the road to where her grandfather was still quarrelling violently with Hans, and pulled him backward by the skirts of his hunting shirt. I looked for another and mightier explosion from the old backwoodsman, but to my astonishment he seemed to forget Hans's existence, and turned and smiled on her benevolently.

"Polly Ann," said he, "what be you about now?"

"Gran'pa," said she, "here's Davy Trimble, who's a good boy, and his pa is just killed by the Cherokees along with Baskin, and he wants work and a home, and he's comin' along with us."

"All right, David," answered Mr. Ripley, mildly, "ef Polly Ann says so, you kin come." As for me, Polly Ann never consulted me on the subject — nor had she need to. I would have followed her to kingdom come, for at the thought of reaching the mountains my heart leaped with joy. We all slept in the one flea−infested, windowless room of the "tavern" that night; and before dawn I was up and untethered the horses, and Polly Ann and I together lifted the two bushels of alum salt on one of the beasts and the ploughshare on the other. By daylight we had left Hans and his farm forever.

I can see the lass now, as she strode along the trace by the flowing river, through sunlight and shadow, straight and supple and strong. Sometimes she sang like a bird, and the forest rang. Sometimes she would make fun of her grandfather or of me; and again she would be silent for an hour at a time, staring ahead. She would wake from those reveries with a laugh, and give me a push to send me rolling down a bank.

But as we rose into the more rugged country we passed more than one charred cabin that told its silent story of Indian massacre. On the scattered hill farms only women and boys and old men were working in the fields, all save the scalawags having gone to join Rutherford. There were 64 plenty of these around the taverns to make eyes at Polly Ann and open love to her, had she allowed them; but she treated them in return to such scathing tirades that they were glad to desist.

We travelled slowly, day by day, until I saw the mountains lift blue against the western sky, and the sight of

them was like home once more. And though I thought with sadness of my father, I was on the whole happier with Polly Ann than I had been in the lonely cabin on the Yadkin. Her spirits flagged a little as she drew near home, but old Mr. Ripley's rose.

"There's Burr's," he would say, "and O'Hara's and Williamson's," marking the cabins set amongst the stump−dotted corn−fields. "And thar," sweeping his hand at a blackened heap of logs lying on the stones, "thar's whar Nell Tyler and her baby was sculped."

"Poor Nell," said Polly Ann, the tears coming into her eyes as she turned away.

"And Jim Tyler was killed gittin' to the fort. He can't say I didn't warn him."

"I reckon he'll never say nuthin', now," said Polly Ann.

It was in truth a dismal sight, — the shapeless timbers, the corn, planted with such care, choked with weeds, and the poor utensils of the little family scattered and broken before the door−sill. These same Indians had killed my father; and there surged up in my breast that hatred of the painted race felt by every backwoods boy in my time.

Towards the end of the day the trace led into a beautiful green valley, and in the middle of it was a stream shining in the afternoon sun. Then Polly Ann fell entirely silent. And presently, as the shadows grew purple, we came to a cabin set under some spreading trees on a knoll where a woman sat spinning at the door, three children playing at her feet. She stared at us so earnestly that I looked at Polly Ann, and saw her redden and pale. The children were the first to come shouting at us, and then the woman dropped her wool and ran down the slope straight into Polly Ann's arms. Mr. Ripley halted the horses with a grunt.

The two women drew off and looked into each other's faces. Then Polly Ann dropped her eyes.

"Have ye — ?" she said, and stopped.

"No, Polly Ann, not one word sence Tom and his Pa went. What do folks say in the settlements?"

Polly Ann turned up her nose.

"They don't know nuthin' in the settlements," she replied.

"I wrote to Tom and told him you was gone," said the older woman. "I knowed he'd wanter hear."

And she looked meaningly at Polly Ann, who said nothing. The children had been pulling at the girl's skirts, and suddenly she made a dash at them. They scattered, screaming with delight, and she after them.

"Howdy, Mr. Ripley?" said the woman, smiling a little.

"Howdy, Mis' McChesney?" said the old man, shortly.

"Who hev ye brought with ye?" she asked, glancing at me.

"A lad Polly Ann took a shine to in the settlements," said the old man. "Polly Ann! Polly Ann!" he cried sharply, "we'll hev to be gittin' home." And then, as though an afterthought (which it really was not), he added, "How be ye for salt, Mis' McChesney?"

"So−so," said she.

"Wal, I reckon a little might come handy," said he. And to the girl who stood panting beside him, "Polly, give Mis' McChesney some salt."

Polly Ann did, and generously, — the salt they had carried with so much labor threescore and ten miles from the settlements. Then we took our departure, the girl turning for one last look at "Tom's" mother, and at the cabin where he had dwelt. We were all silent the rest of the way, climbing the slender trail through the forest over the gap into the next valley. For I was jealous of this "Tom."

Then, in the smoky haze that rises just before night lets her curtain fall, we descended the farther slope, and came to Mr. Ripley's cabin.

Polly Ann lived alone with her grandfather, her father and mother having been killed by indians some years before. There was that bond between us, had we needed one. Her father had built the cabin, a large one with a loft and a ladder climbing to it, and a sleeping room and a kitchen. The cabin stood on a terrace that nature had levelled, looking across a swift and shallow stream towards the mountains. There was the truck patch, with its yellow squashes and melons, and cabbages and beans, where Polly Ann and I worked through the hot mornings; and the corn patch, with the great stumps of the primeval trees standing in it. All around us the silent forest threw its encircling arms, spreading up the slopes, higher and higher, to crown the crests with the little pines and

hemlocks and balsam fir.

There had been no meat save bacon since the McChesneys had left, for of late game had become scarce, and old Mr. Ripley was too feeble to go on the long hunts. So one day, when Polly Ann was gone across the ridge, I took down the long rifle from the buckhorns over the hearth, and the hunting knife and powder−horn and pouch beside it, and trudged up the slope to a game trail I discovered. All day I waited, until the forest light grew gray, when a buck came and stood over the water, raising his head and stamping from time to time. I took aim in the notch of a sapling, brought him down, cleaned and skinned and dragged him into the water, and triumphantly hauled one of his hams down the trail. Polly Ann gave a cry of joy when she saw me.

"Davy," she exclaimed, "little Davy, I reckoned you 68 was gone away from us. Gran'pa, here is Davy back, and he has shot a deer."

"You don't say?" replied Mr. Ripley, surveying me and my booty with a grim smile.

"How could you, Gran'pa?" said Polly Ann, reproachfully.

"Wal," said Mr. Ripley, "the gun was gone, an' Davy. I reckon he ain't sich a little rascal after all."

Polly Ann and I went up the next day, and brought the rest of the buck merrily homeward. After that I became the hunter of the family; but oftener than not I returned tired and empty−handed, and ravenously hungry. Indeed, our chief game was rattlesnakes, which we killed by the dozens in the corn and truck patches.

As Polly Ann and I went about our daily chores, we would talk of Tom McChesney. Often she would sit idle at the hand−mill, a light in her eyes that I would have given kingdoms for. One memorable morning, early in the crisp autumn, a grizzled man strode up the trail, and Polly Ann dropped the ear of corn she was husking and stood still. It was Mr. McChesney, Tom's father — alone.

"No, Polly Ann," he cried, "there ain't nuthin' happened. We've laid out the hill towns. But the Virginny men wanted a guide, and Tom volunteered, and so he ain't come back with Rutherford's boys. He sent ye this."

He drew from the bosom of his hunting shirt a soiled piece of birch bark, scrawled over with rude writing. Polly seized it, and flew into the house.

The hickories turned a flaunting yellow, the oaks a copper−red, the leaves crackled on the Catawba vines, and still Tom McChesney did not come. The Cherokees were homeless and houseless and subdued, — their hill towns 69 burned, their corn destroyed, their squaws and children wanderers. One by one the men of the Grape Vine settlement returned to save what they might of their crops, and plough for the next year — Burrs, O'Haras, Williamsons, and Winns. Then one windy morning, when the leaves were kiting over the valley and we were getting ready for pounding hominy, a figure appeared on the trail. Steadying the hood of her sunbonnet with her hand, the girl gazed long and earnestly, and a lump came into my throat at the thought that it might be Tom McChesney.

Polly Ann sat down at the block again in disgust.

"It's only Chauncey Dike," she said.

"Who's Chauncey Dike?" I asked.

"He reckons he's a buck."

Chauncey drew near with a strut. He had very long black hair, a new coonskin cap with a long tassel, and a new blue−fringed hunting shirt. What first caught my eye was a couple of withered Indian scalps that hung by their long locks from his girdle.

"Wal, Polly Ann, are ye tired of hanging out fer Tom?" he cried, when a dozen paces away.

"I wouldn't be if you was the only one left ter choose," Polly Ann retorted.

Chauncey Dike stopped in his tracks and haw−hawed with laughter. But I could see that he was not very much pleased.

"Wal," said he, "I 'low ye won't see Tom very soon. He's gone to Kaintuckee."

"Has he?" said Polly Ann, with brave indifference.

"He met a gal on the trail — a blazin' fine gal," said Chauncey Dike. "She was goin' to Kaintuckee. And Tom — he 'lowed he'd go 'long."

Polly Ann laughed, and fingered the withered pieces of skin at Chauncey's girdle.

"Did Tom give you them sculps?" she asked innocently.

Chauncey drew up stiffly.

"Who? Tom McChesney? I reckon he ain't got none to give. This here's from a big brave at Noewee, whar the

Virginny boys was surprised." And he held up the one with the longest tuft. "He'd liked to tomahawked me out'n the briers, but I throwed him fust."

"Shucks," said Polly Ann, pounding the corn, "I reckon you found him dead."

But that night, as we sat before the fading red of the backlog, the old man dozing in his chair, Polly Ann put her hand on mine.

"Davy," she said softly, "do you reckon he's gone to Kaintuckee?"

The days passed. The wind grew colder, and one subdued dawn we awoke to find that the pines had fantastic white arms, and the stream ran black between white banks. All that day, and for many days after, the snow added silently to the thickness of its blanket, and winter was upon us. It was a long winter and a rare one. Polly Ann sat by the little window of the cabin, spinning the flax into linsey−woolsey. And she made a hunting shirt for her grandfather, and another little one for me which she fitted with careful fingers. But as she spun, her wheel made the only music — Polly Ann sang no more. Once I came on her as she was thrusting the tattered piece of birch 71 bark into her gown, but she never spoke to me of Tom McChesney. When, from time to time, the snow melted on the hillsides, I sometimes surprised a deer there and shot him with the heavy rifle. And so the months wore on till spring.

The buds reddened and popped, and the briers grew pink and white. Through the lengthening days we toiled in the truck patch, but always as I bent to my work Polly Ann's face saddened me — it had once been so bright, and it should have been so at this season. Old Mr. Ripley grew querulous and savage and hard to please. And in the evening, when my work was done, I often lay on the banks of the stream staring at the high ridge (its ragged edges the setting sun burned a molten gold), and the thought grew on me that I might make my way over the mountains into that land beyond, and find Tom for Polly Ann. I even climbed the watershed to the east as far as the O'Hara farm, to sound that big Irishman about the trail. For he had once gone to Kentucky, to come back with his scalp and little besides. But O'Hara, with his brogue, gave me such a terrifying notion of the horrors of the wilderness trail that I threw up all thought of following it alone. War was a−waging in Kentucky. The great Indian nations were making a frantic effort to drive from their hunting grounds the little bands of settlers there, and these were in sore straits.

There came a certain hot Sunday in July when Polly Ann having gone on an errand, and Grandpa Ripley having gone to spend the day at old man Winn's, I was left alone. I remember I sat on the squared log of the door−step 72 cleaning the long rifle, when suddenly I looked up, startled to see a man standing in front of me. How he got there I know not. He was a young man, very spare and very burned, with bright red hair and blue eyes that had a kind of laughter in them, and yet were sober. His buckskin hunting shirt was old and stained and frayed by the briers, and his leggins and moccasins were wet from fording the stream. He leaned his chin on the muzzle of his gun.

"Folks live here, sonny?" said he.

I nodded.

"Whar be they?"

"Out," said I.

"Comin' back?" he asked.

"To−night."

And I began to rub the lock.

"Be they good folks?" said he.

"Yes," I answered.

"Wal," said he, making a move to pass me, "I reckon I'll slip in and take what I've a mind to, and move on."

Now I liked the man's looks very much, but I did not know what he would do. I got in his way and clutched the gun. It was loaded, but not primed, and I emptied a little powder from the flask in the pan.

At that he grinned.

"You're a good boy, sonny," he said. "Do you reckon you could hit me if you shot?"

"Yes," I said. But I knew I could scarcely hold the gun out straight without a rest.

"And do you reckon I could hit you fust?" he asked.

At that I laughed, and he laughed.

"What's your name?"

I told him.

"Who do you love best in all the world?" said he.

It was a queer question. but I told him Polly Ann Ripley.

"Oh!" said he, after a pause. "And what's she like?"

"She's beautiful," I said; "she's good."

"And a sharp tongue, I reckon."

"When people need it," I answered.

"Do you reckon your Polly Ann would give me a little mite to eat?"

This time I jumped up, ran into the house, and got down some corn−pone and a leg of turkey. For that was the rule of the border. He took them in great bites, but slowly, and he picked the bones clean.

"I had breakfast yesterday morning," said he, "about forty mile from here."

"And nothing since?" said I, in astonishment.

"Fresh air and water and exercise," said he, and sat down on the grass. He was silent for a long while, and so was I.

All at once he stared up the ridge.

"Is that Polly Ann?" said he.

I looked, and far up the trail was a speck.

"I reckon it is," I answered, and wondered at his eyesight.

He looked at me queerly.

"I reckon I'll go over there and sit down, so's not to be in the way." And he walked around the corner of the house.

Polly Ann sauntered down the trail.

"Have you been lonesome, Davy?" she said.

"No," said I, "I've had a visitor."

"It's not Chauncey Dike again?"

"No, it wasn't Chauncey. This man would like to have seen you."

"I reckon that's so," said the stranger, who had risen and was standing at the corner.

Polly Ann looked at him, and the color surged into her cheeks and mounted to her fair forehead.

"Tom!" she faltered.

"I've come back, Polly Ann," said he. But his voice was not so clear as a while ago.

Then Polly Ann surprised me.

"What made you come back?" said she, as though she didn't care a minkskin.

"I reckon it was to fetch you, Polly Ann."

"I like that!" cried she. "He's come to fetch me, Davy. I heerd you fetched one gal acrost the mountains, Tom, and now you want to fetch another."

"Polly Ann," says he, "there was a time when you knew a truthful man from a liar."

"That time's past, Tom McChesney; I reckon all men are liars. What are ye Tom−foolin' about here for, 76 when yere ma's breakin' her heart? I wonder ye come back at all."

"Polly Ann," says he, very serious, "I ain't a boaster. But when I think what I come through to git here, I wonder that I come back at all. The folks shut up at Harrod's said it was sure death ter cross the mountains now. I've walked two hundred miles, and fed seven times, and my sculp's as near hangin' on a red stick's belt as I ever want it to be."

"Tom" said Polly Ann, with her hands on her hips and her sunbonnet tilted, "that's the longest speech you ever made in your life."

And so it was that preparations for a wedding went on that week. And I had not thought that the Grape Vine settlement held so many people. They came from other settlements, too, for news spread quickly in that country, despite the distances. All the week they came, loaded with offerings, turkeys and venison and pork and bear meat — greatest delicacy of all — until the cool spring was filled for the feast. And from thirty miles down the Broad, a gaunt baptist preacher on a fat white pony arrived the night before. He had been sent for to tie the knot.

Polly Ann's wedding−day dawned bright and fair, and long before the sun glistened on the corn tassels we were up and clearing out the big room. The fiddlers came first — a merry lot. Then the guests from afar began to arrive. Some of them had travelled half the night. The bridegroom's friends were assembling at the McChesney place. And at last, when the sun was over the stream, rose such Indian war−whoops and shots from the ridge trail as made me think the redskins were upon us. The shouts and hurrahs grew louder and louder, the quickening thud of horses' hoofs was heard in the woods, and there burst into sight of the assembly by the truck patch two wild figures on crazed horses charging down the path towards the house. We scattered to right and left. On they came, leaping logs and brush and ditches, until one of them pulled up, yelling madly, at the very door, the foam−flecked sides of his horse moving with quick heaves.

It was Chauncey Dike, and he had won the race for the bottle of "Black Betty," — Chauncey Dike, his long, black hair shining with bear's oil. Amid the cheers of the bride's friends he leaped from his saddle, mounted a stump 79 and, flapping his arms, crowed in victory. Before he had done the vanguard of the groom's friends were upon us, pell−mell, all in the finest of backwoods regalia, — new hunting shirts, trimmed with bits of color, and all armed to the teeth — scalping knife, tomahawk, and all. Nor had Chauncey Dike forgotten the scalp of the brave who leaped at him out of the briers at Neowee.

Polly Ann was radiant in a white linen gown, woven and sewed by her own hands. It was not such a gown as Mrs. Temple would have worn, and yet she was to me an hundred times more beautiful than that lady in all her silks. Peeping out from under it were the little blue−beaded moccasins which Tom himself had brought across the mountains in the bosom of his hunting shirt. Polly Ann was radiant, and yet at times so rapturously shy that when the preacher announced himself ready to tie the knot she ran into the house and hid in the cupboard. Thence, coloring like a wild rose, she was dragged by a boisterous bevy of girls in linsey−woolsey to the spreading maple of the forest that stood on the high bank over the stream. The assembly fell solemn, and not a sound was heard save the breathing of nature in the heyday of her time.

The deep−toned words of the preacher in prayer broke the stillness. They were made man and wife. And then began a day of merriment, of unrestraint, such as the backwoods alone knows. The feast was spread out in the long grass under the trees — sides of venison, bear meat, corn−pone fresh baked by Mrs. McChesney and Polly Ann herself, and all the vegetables in the patch. There was no stint, either, of maple beer and rum and "Black Betty," and toasts to the bride and groom amidst gusts of laughter "that they might populate Kaintuckee." 80 The fiddlers played, and there were foot races and shooting matches. Ay, and wrestling matches in the severe manner of the backwoods between the young bucks, more than one of which might have ended seriously were it not for the high humor of the crowd.

So the long summer afternoon wore away into twilight, and the sun fell behind the blue ridges. Pine knots were lighted in the big room, the fiddlers set to again, and then came jigs and three and four handed reels that made the puncheons rattle, — chicken−flutter and cut−the−buckle, — and Polly Ann was the leader now, the young men flinging the girls from fireplace to window in the reels, and back again; and when, panting and perspiring, the lass was too tired to stand longer, she dropped into the hospitable lap of the nearest buck who was perched on the bench along the wall awaiting his chance. For so it went in the backwoods in those days, and long after, and no harm in it that ever I could see.

Suddenly, as if by concert, the music stopped, and a shout of laughter rang under the beams as Polly Ann flew out of the door with the girls after her, as swift of foot as she. They dragged her, a struggling captive, to the bride−chamber which made the other end of the house, and when they emerged, blushing and giggling and subdued, the fun began with Tom McChesney. He gave the young men a pretty fight indeed, and long before they had him conquered the elder guests had made their escape through door and window.

All night the reels and jigs went on, and the feasting and drinking too. In the fine rain that came at dawn to hide the crests, the company rode wearily homeward through the notches.