Chapter XV

Whack! went Jim's ax. Whack! Whack! *Crash!* Suddenly he flung the ax down and with a couple of highly colored remarks in Crow, waded into the blackberry tangle and seized the offending root. He put his whole weight against it, yanking and tugging until it gave way and sent him sprawling. He picked himself up. In thunderous silence he scrambled free of the clutching thorns and snatched up the ax again. Whack! it went. Crash! *Whack!*

Five minutes later he set the ax blade against the ground and leaned heavily on the helve. Puffing for breath, he dragged his sleeve across his streaming forehead. From the next thicket the even, monotonous rhythm of Jonnie's ax went on, unbroken. Chunk—chunk—chunk—chunk.

Jim glowered at his brother. There had been hardly a pause in that sound all morning long. How in ten thousand devils did he do it?

The breeze was soft, the April sky dazzling. But here was this cussed blackberry thicket, the hazel bushes yonder, stumps, and more brush—all to be cleared before a fellow could enjoy life.

Wham! the ax went, fiercer than ever. Whack! Whack! *Crash!*

Jonnie grinned into the clump of ground oak he was clear-

ing. He listened a while to the furious activity from Jim's part of the field, then stopped work and leaned his crossed arms on his ax.

"Hey, Jim!" he called.

The noises ceased abruptly. Jonnie strolled across the slashed area. "I got to wonderin'. When you're trackin' somebody—like you follered them cattle thieves, you know—and they've got a couple days' head start on you, that makes it pretty tough, don't it? You got to run all the way."

"*Run?* Are you crazy?"

"Well, you got to pick up that distance somehow, not just foller two days behind."

"But thunder, Jonnie, you'd kill yer horse if you tried to pick it up *runnin'!* No, you do it gradual. Git started a hour earlier than they're likely to, keep goin' a hour later. Don't stop long to eat. Keep a even pace but kinda slow, so yer horse don't git wore out. Run! *Wagh!* Slow and steady, that's the—"

Jim stopped. Jonnie was smiling broadly. There was a silence in which a blue jay jeered raucously from the nearby hazel bushes. Jim gave his ax a toss, caught it, and began to laugh.

"All right, I'll slow down. But thunder, they's a lot of this here scrub to clear away!"

"We can't do it all at once. Look back yonder where we started from a couple weeks ago. We're gettin' on."

"Yeah," Jim admitted.

He thought about it as he went back to work—at a more temperate pace this time. Jonnie was right. He usually was. And it was just like him to go at explaining a thing that way—making you prove his point for him before you even knew what he was driving at. Tracking! Running all the way! Jim had to laugh. No flies on Jonnie when it came to brains.

And they were getting on, that was certain, with the brush slashing and in a lot of other ways besides. Everything had

changed. The tepee was gone. Its hides hung now over the rough walls inside the cabin; the lodgepoles were firewood. Sally's bed had been hoisted to the loft—to Dan'l's loud disappointment. He'd wanted Jim up there instead. But Jim was better suited the way things were. His willow and rawhide frame stood across the room from Jonnie's bed, under the window and not two steps from the door. It hadn't been so bad, sleeping inside.

There was a shed behind the cabin now, too, and a heifer purchased on credit from Mr. Mills was inside the shed. Jonnie had said, "With you and me both workin', Jim, we'll have another ten acres cleared before time to plow. Shucks, we can pay off that Hudson's Bay debt and have the heifer too—and maybe even a new dress for you, sis!"

Yes, they were getting on.

The axes chunked all morning, flashing in the sun. Jim shed his shirt before long, and kept himself rigidly to Jonnie's even tempo. But in spite of that, by noon he had worked up a steaming sweat and a hunger that made him feel like one vast cavern. He flung down his ax with relief when he spotted Dan'l trudging across the glades with the basket of lunch.

It was shady and cool beside the brook, and the slabs of cold meat and hoecake tasted like a feast.

"Me and Moki found a bear's track this mornin'," Dan'l told Jim eagerly. "Little bitty one. I think it was a cub."

"What kind?"

"I dunno. Black, I think. Listen, Jim, couldn't you and me go find it after you get through eatin', and catch it, and raise it like a pet?"

"Moki'd worry it to death."

"No, he wouldn't, he'd like it! Gee, couldn't we, Jim?"

"You take a cub and pretty soon you got its mama on yer neck. Don't forget that."

"You could handle her! Listen, when you get through with eatin'—"

Jim shifted unhappily. "Dan'l, I can't be goin' off after bears and such. I got work to do." He'd said the same sort of thing so often lately that he almost dreaded to see Dan'l coming. He hated to keep putting the boy off and putting him off, but there was no help for it. "One of these days I'll git finished here, and then you and me'll go huntin'."

"Meantime, Dan'l," Jonnie put in, "I reckon sis can use some help with moldin' them candles. You best take the basket and run on."

"Gee!" said Dan'l. He picked up the basket and plodded off toward the cabin, every line of him eloquent with disappointment.

The food didn't taste good now. Jim finished his quickly and went back to work, more impatient than ever to get the job done and over with. It was a chore to keep his ax going slow and steady.

But at the end of the day there was a wider swath of slash behind him than ever before. He couldn't help feeling a grim satisfaction as he shouldered his ax. He might not have enjoyed it, but he'd done it; even Joe Meek could boast no more than that. And he was through with it till morning, by gor!

He welcomed each day's end for more reasons than one. There was something good about walking over the ridge beside your brother, the sky red or smoky purple beyond the woods, and a delicious languor spreading through your tired body. They always made for the willows and plunged briefly into the Tualatin's ice water, afterward chasing each other headlong up the slope toward the glowing yellow rectangle of the cabin doorway. Jim won these races without much trouble.

"Racin' with you is no job for an amateur!" Jonnie complained that night as he arrived, puffing from exertion and cold

water, at the outside bench where Jim was already pulling on his clothes. "How the devil did you get so fast on your feet?"

"Chasin' butterflies," Jim said with a grin.

"Doin' *what?*"

But Jim suddenly felt a little self-conscious. "*Wagh!* I was jokin'. Hurry up there, I'm half froze fer somethin' to eat."

It was good to go inside, too, out of the chilly dusk, and find the fire blazing, the cabin warm and filled with the smell of meat—all roasted and waiting for you. Dan'l and Moki sprang up at once from their tussling on the buffalo robe that covered the earthen floor. Sally, her cheeks flushed in their halo of golden tendrils from the heat of the fire, flashed a welcoming smile, then scolded them for running around with wet heads.

"Set down now and stay out of my way. I'll have supper on in a minute. Dan'l, hop to it, get the trenchers laid out."

Jim ignored the stools and the one chair, as usual, and squatted down Indian fashion against the wall. There was always this moment, just after he stepped into the cabin, when he wanted to turn right around and go out again. He wondered why. It was a cheerful enough scene in the light of the fire blazing there on the big stone hearth. The light shimmered over the satiny hides on the walls and struck glints from the row of pewter mugs hanging along the bottom of a shelf. In the shadows at one end of the room stood Jonnie's bed, covered by a faded scarlet blanket; over it jutted the loft, a braced platform with a ladder leading up to it. At the other end were table and benches, cupboard and churn, a shelf holding coffee mill and candle mold. Dan'l moved about the table, clattering spoons and trenchers.

Nothing to dread about all this. But there on the split-log mantel stood that clock, like a ghost in the room.

Jim got up restlessly and walked to the hearth. Sally had a

pot of something bubbling on the black iron crane, and it smelled good. So did the haunch that hung from the mantel on twisted thongs, glistening and dripping into a pan below as it slowly revolved.

"Man, I'm hungry," Jonnie murmured suddenly from where he sprawled on Jim's bed. "Smell that, will you? I could eat it all."

"You'll get a chance to try." Sally slammed the cupboard door and hurried across the room, shoving Jim impatiently out of her way as she bent to drag the hoecake out of the coals. Jim grinned, the clock forgotten and the restless moment over for another night. Sally went at cooking the same way he'd gone at those bushes this morning. She grabbed a handful of her apron and swung the pot outward on its iron crane. "Now if somebody'll just lift down that haunch while I dish out the mush, we'll be ready to eat."

Sometimes, after supper was over, Jonnie would reach for his banjo and make that potent medicine he understood so well—singing soft and lonesome so that you thought of every prairie trail you'd ever followed, or snapping erect with his fingers flying and his white grin flashing, fetching Dan'l to his feet in a leaping dance and heightening the color in Sally's cheeks as she laughed and clapped out the rhythm.

But tonight Jonnie chose the other thing they did together. When the food was cleared away and the fire replenished, when Sally had settled herself by the table with her patching and Dan'l sprawled on the buffalo robe, his drowsy golden head against Moki's gray one—then Jonnie went to the mantel and took down the big Bible.

Jim was mending a moccasin, but he stopped, frowning uneasily, as Jonnie trimmed the candle and opened the book. This was medicine too, a different, troubling kind like the clock made. Jim's muscles were gathered for leaping up and

heading for the door when Jonnie began to read—and then he was caught, held fast by the curious strength and music of the words, by the puzzle of their meaning.

"And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters . . ."

It was like a strange language; almost, but never quite, comprehensible, yet queerly familiar to Jim. He wished he knew what it meant, what it had to do with himself. But he was afraid to ask.

He was half afraid of the book itself tonight. Jonnie turned pages at random, and read, "The Lord will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, with madness, with blindness, and astonishment of heart . . ."

A trickle of cold went down Jim's spine at these unimaginable horrors. How could the others sit there so calmly, hearing all that and never even stirring? It sounded like the blackest of magic.

Jonnie turned more pages. ". . . He shall cover thee with his feathers . . . thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night nor for the arrow that flieth by day. A thousand shall fall at thy side but it shall not come nigh thee . . ."

Arrows and night attacks—Jim knew those well. Here was something he could grasp. Clearly it was a medicine song of unheard-of power. But whose? He was afraid to ask that too. He sat frowning, fingering the smoke-dark moccasin and wishing Jonnie would close the book.

At last Sally rose, gave a shake to the last pair of new-patched jeans, and tossed them over the table. "There! I reckon they'll hold together a little longer now. My stars, if I never saw another patch as long as I live— Jonnie, it's bedtime. Here's that shirt, such as it is. Ain't nothin' *but* patches by now—"

Jonnie put the big book away and laughed quietly, jerking a thumb at the slumbering little boy on the floor. "Looks like Dan'l's left us. Hey, there, wake up long enough to go to bed!"

Dan'l roused and stumbled up the ladder, mumbling "G'night."

"Good night," yawned Sally, following him.

Jim stepped outside to breathe the cold night air and look up at the stars. They were hidden behind clouds now, and the breeze was full of the smell of rain. He walked up through the firs to the ridge, spotted Buckskin's pale shape next to the mule's dark one at the foot of the slope. A muffled thumping came occasionally from the shed where the heifer was kept.

Later, lying in bed in the shadowy room, with the banked fire spilling crimson over the hearth and Jonnie's breathing mingling with the soft drum of rain outside, Jim wondered why he still felt he had not come home.

So the days passed, one very like the other, as spring drifted up the valley. One morning Sally asked Jim to row across to the Rutledges and ask the loan of their big iron pot.

"Time I set about my soap makin'. I'm feared to keep them saved-up fats and meat scraps around much longer, with warm weather comin' on. Dan'l, fetch them two barrels from the shed and a couple of noggins, and get yourself busy makin' lye while I finish up inside. I'll be out to help you directly."

By the time Jim climbed back up the bank, lugging the big kettle, Dan'l had the two barrels set side by side on a bench by the shed, and was lining them with dried grasses. As Jim drew near, the boy placed a noggin under the hole in the bottom of the barrel with a resentful crash.

"Seems like all we ever do around here any more is work," he grumbled.

Sally, her faded but carefully patched blue dress swathed in an enormous apron, went past with a shovelful of wood ashes. "Since when," she asked Dan'l, "have we ever done anything

else? You're pullin' your share these days, is the only difference. Just set that pot down yonder, Jim, we won't be boilin' the fats for a while yet. Lye's got to get strong enough to float an egg."

She dumped the ashes into the nearest barrel and hurried off for more, while Jim lowered the kettle to the ground.

"What's the matter, Dan'l, they keepin' yer nose too close to the grindstone?"

"I reckon you wouldn't much care if they did or not."

"Why, thunder, you ain't sore at *me* about it are you?"

Dan'l didn't answer, but picked up a bucket of water and poured it over the ashes in the barrel, his snub-nosed little profile remote.

"Dan'l, I don't have time to play with you no more. I'm workin' too."

"Yeah, I know." The boy gave a halfhearted smile. "Maybe later on, though? When the clearin's all done? You said someday you'd show me how to use your bow and arrow, and teach me to talk Crow."

Jim chewed his lip. He couldn't be teaching the boy things like that—now. "Yeah, we'll find somethin' to do," he murmured. "Later on."

But there was no let up in the work when you were turning a stretch of raw country into a farm. The day came when the last stump was uprooted, the last hazel thicket laid low. At sunup the next morning Jonnie dragged out his plow, hardly willing to finish breakfast in his eagerness to get down to his two waiting fields. Ten minutes later, with a "*Hup!*" to his oxen, he thrust the plow share deep into virgin soil, watching over his shoulder joyfully as the rich dark loam turned back in fertile stripes behind him.

Jim, hoe in hand, paused at the top of the ridge. The face of the valley was changing, as he had known it would. He had

ridden to Willamette Falls the day before after meal and salt, and everywhere he had seen these fresh dark furrows striping the land like open wounds, and emptiness where groves of fir and oak had stood. Their own claim seemed naked yonder, with the scrub oak all gone and part of the woods itself, and only a pasture's worth of glades left alone for the animals' grazing.

He reached out to touch one of the huge old firs that towered all about him. Plenty of forest left up here, at least, plenty on the untouched acres to the west. But how long would that last?

Jonnie marched up and down in the sunshine, his taut body aslant against the oxen's pull. Beyond him spread a sea of treetops, a roll of hills, then the perfect, glistening cone of Mount Hood—so lofty it dwarfed the range it sprang from, seeming to rise alone from level plains. Plenty of forest up there, too, among the snows—and plenty on the other side, where unfenced wilderness swept away to Absaroka.

Hastily Jim started on down the slope to follow after Jonnie and break up the clods with his hoe. But he had noticed that the snowy mantle which had covered the mountain all winter had shrunk to a gleaming cap. There were no barriers now; the gates of the valley were unlocked.

Jim, working shirtless one day in July in the garden plot at the foot of the ridge, looked up to see Dan'l wandering aimlessly across the pasture in the direction of the creek.

The boy seemed forlorn, in spite of the stubborn tilt of the bright head and its proud refusal to turn in Jim's direction. That hoped-for "later on" had never come; they hadn't played a game in weeks.

Jonnie was busy at the other end of the garden. Jim straightened, dropping his trowel, vaulted the rail fence into the pasture, and strolled toward the boy.

"Dan'l! Hey, Dan'l. C'mere."

The boy hesitated the fraction of a moment, then walked to meet him.

"Take off your clothes. You won't want nothin' hamperin' you."

The remote, guarded look in the gray-green eyes changed to one of interest. "We gonna do somethin'?"

"You are. Git off them clothes."

All eagerness now, Dan'l stripped off shirt and jeans, kicked them away and stood waiting. Jim smiled. It was a strong young body there before him, clad only in the moccasins and brief drawers. Well, he would make it stronger.

"Now," he said. He pointed suddenly. "Catch me that butterfly. Quick!"

After a startled instant Dan'l was off like a flash, darting here and there over the pasture in erratic zigzags, his hands clutching at the flitting spot of yellow, his fair skin gleaming against the dark woods beyond. It was a frantic race, full of unexpected stumblings and miraculous recoveries, and one headlong spill. Jim felt his own muscles alternately tense and loosen as he stood there laughing, all else forgotten. And when Dan'l gave one last desperate spurt and pounced on his elusive prey, Jim let loose a whoop of victory.

"Bring it here, now! Bring it here!"

Breathless and flushed with triumph, Dan'l came running. "Got 'im—by cracky!" he puffed. "Whadda I—do now?"

"Now you make magic. Let me have him."

Carefully Jim took the little creature and showed Dan'l how to rub the yellow wing dust on his chest, teaching him the words in Crow: "Oh, butterfly, give me your strength and swiftness . . ."

"What's that mean?" demanded Dan'l eagerly.

"Means he's got to make you as fast as he was. Don't tell

nobody, just say it and make the magic, and you'll win ever' foot race in the valley."

Dan'l was already off after another butterfly by the time Jim realized that Jonnie was standing at his elbow.

"So that's how you got so fast on your feet!"

Jim laughed. "I told you."

"Yeah," mused Jonnie. "Chasin' butterflies. You wasn't jokin' after all." He watched Dan'l's darting and dashing a moment, and added, "I think them Injuns knew a thing or two. Anybody'd get feather footed if he done that very much."

"You had to be, in Absaroka. We run foot races all the time, us boys, and by gor, we'd ruther've busted our lungs than come in last! All them strong, big warriors standin' there in their coup feathers, watchin' us. We had butterfly dust on us from spring to fall."

"Rough on the butterfly population," commented Jonnie with a grin. He added casually, "It ain't the dust or the words that turns the trick, it's the chasin'. But a-course you know that."

Jim didn't know anything of the sort. Medicine was medicine. But he didn't say so, he only turned and led the way back to the garden, whistling tunelessly. When they reached the potato patch where his trowel lay, Jonnie stopped beside him.

"Gettin' homesick, Jim?" he asked abruptly.

"Naa. I'm fine." Jim picked up the trowel and fell to work.

It wasn't quite true. The old life tugged at him no matter how he resisted. Scalp Necklace and the others would be winding over the prairie this month to new buffalo grounds; a thin, brown line of horses and travois and baggage, of squaws and darting, black-haired children and stately chieftains and reckless, hard-riding young men on feather-bedecked horses racing each other on the outskirts. The whole scene rose before him, a picture drawn indelibly on his brain; and when he shook his

head, trying to forget it, another rose in its place: a beaver stream flowing between cottonwoods in a high meadow, the sky shadowy with dusk, and the smell of smoke in the air.

Wheat and spuds and fences were getting too much for him, rapidly. It was about time he went to see Joe Meek.

A couple of restless weeks later, on a sun-drenched, somnolent day in the middle of August, he dismounted in front of Meek's cabin in the Tualatin valley. He was halfway to the door when Meek's Nez Perce squaw padded around the corner of the house, a knife in one hand and a skinned rabbit in the other. The sheriff wasn't home, she informed him. He'd gone south three sleeps past to settle some kind of trouble among the Umpquas.

Jim walked away, sullen with disappointment. He'd waited too long. By now he was wild to talk to somebody of his own sort.

He dug his heels into Buckskin and spurted over the ridge with Moki streaking beside him, heading east for Willamette Falls—which everyone was now beginning to call Oregon City. He'd trade the pelt in his pouch for Galena lead and replenish his supply of bullets tonight, and tomorrow he'd go hunting. At least he could do that much. Stay two or three days, maybe a week—it wouldn't matter, the grain stood waist high and golden in Jonnie's fields now, there was little to do until harvest, which would come all too soon to chain him down again.

But Jim didn't go hunting on the morrow. He didn't even get his bullets made. Striding out of the trading post in Oregon City an hour later, he saw Moki stop short, ears erect and nose quivering, then dash headlong across the rutted street toward the rail where the mare was tied. Alarmed at once, Jim leaped past the startled group of farmers and tradesmen on the porch, and gained the road. There he halted.

A man in buckskin was bending over Moki, one hand hold-

ing the bridle of a familiar tall horse while the other tusseled with the ecstatic dog.

There could be only one such pair of faded scarlet leggings, one such spare frame and battered hat. Jim knew—even before he fully believed it, even before the man straightened and met his eyes, smiling a slow and well-remembered smile.

It was Tom Rivers.

With a yell that cracked in the middle, Jim was upon him.

Chapter XVI

"Yep, hoss," Tom said, leaning back on his elbow and stretching out a foot to shove a log farther into the fire, "I kinda figgered all along it was this valley that letter was talkin' about. So Jonnie warn't no sperrit after all?"

Jim grinned. "Not by a long chalk. He's mighty lively."

"When am I gonna git to see him?"

"Tomorrer. We'll go on down there tomorrer."

Tonight, though, there was still too much unsaid—they'd barely started. After the first joyous confusion of back thumping, hand shaking, and incoherent questions and answers, their sole thought had been to get away from the town and the staring onlookers, off alone where they could talk.

But conversation during the ride west into the hills had been curtailed by the reckless pace they set each other, and limited to cheerful insults and the discussion of campsites. Even later, making camp and seeing to the horses, they had exchanged only scraps of information about themselves, Jim parrying Tom's frequent questions for no reason he could think of except that there was such a vast amount to tell and he didn't know how to start.

They were lounging now beside their supper fire near the banks of a little stream, chewing the last of the buffalo jerky Tom had produced from his possibles. It was good beyond

all belief to eat buffalo again, to sprawl like this watching the firelight dance over Tom's familiar, weather-beaten face. He looked thinner than Jim remembered him, but his blue eyes were shrewd as ever, his drawl as soft, and his grin as warm.

He'd run into Black Jaw Hervey down at Taos, and heard about the boy in the wagon train who looked like Adam Russell, and had told Hervey the letter reached its mark. "We figgered you two must've got together at The Dalles, and from there they ain't no place much to go, exceptin' west. That how it happened?"

"Yeah, that's it. Tom, how was Taos?"

"*Wagh!* Mighty slow. Warn't but half a dozen trappers in the hull town, and more Mexicans than Injuns. Why, you couldn't hardly git you up a hand game."

"Warn't Peliot there? Or Evart?"

Tom shook his head. "Gone back to the States. Ever'body's gone. Scattered, dead, quit the trade. Hervey was headin' east when I left fer Californy."

"How come you went to Californy?"

"Shucks, I dunno. It was the only place I hadn't been. It's quite a place, if you savvy Spanish. Mighty nice weather. And trees? Hoss, you ain't never rightly seen a tree till you've met up with one of them redwoods. They're a mile around." His smile faded. "Rest of the place is kinda bare, though—down south in Mission country it is. And it don't never git winter there." He shrugged. "I dunno. It ain't fer me."

"Any beaver?"

"Naaa."

There was unexpected bitterness in the syllable. Tom fished in his pouch a moment and drew out his pipe. In the silence Jim could hear the stream running along out there in the dark, and the night wind high in the branches, and the soft ripping noise the horses made as they cropped the grass. It sounded lonesome.

"Tom, I thought you was gonna go git yer squaw."

"I did git her." Rivers smiled crookedly, his long fingers stuffing kinnikinnick into his pipe—that familiar long-stemmed Indian pipe made of the red clay known only to the Plains tribes, the bowl marked in black and white with a Blackfoot symbol. "I did git her. But I reckon she figgered there warn't much future in a beaver man no more. 'Long about a month ago, when we warn't too fer from Nez Perce country, she up and packed her parfleche, and roped her hoss, and tuck off home—back to them relatives." Tom smiled again. "I couldn't blame her."

It was Tom who was lonesome. Mighty lonesome. "You aimin' to stay here?" Jim asked gently. "You'd be welcome."

"Oh, I'll hang around awhile. But, hoss, I doubt if I'd ever git to feelin' natural in a valley."

"You could try it out. You gotta do somethin'."

Tom pulled a blazing twig out of the fire and held it to his pipe before he answered. Then he said, very casually, "I hear they's still beaver in the Rockies. South Park."

Jim watched him closely as the little flame dimmed and flared, dimmed and flared, over the glowing tobacco. Was Tom feeling him out? Before he could decide, Rivers tossed away the twig and lay back on his elbow, his grin veiled by a cloud of thin blue smoke.

"Lookee here, hoss, I come up here jest mainly to find out how you was makin' it. Ain't you gonna tell me? By golly, the next time I'm fool enough to hike it over a mountain range to hunt up a no-good, knife-throwin', yaller-eyed coyote what won't even open his trap . . ." He dodged amiably as Jim's knife came sailing past his ear. "Ain't slowed down none, I see. Well, I ain't neither." He reached up without looking and yanked the knife out of the tree behind his head. "Go on, that don't change my mind none. Start talkin'."

Jim grinned and settled himself comfortably. "What d'ya want to hear?"

"Want to hear about all this plowin' you been doin'. Jim Keath a farmer! By golly, that takes some believin'!"

Jim's grin vanished. "I ain't no farmer."

"Why, you said you got twenty acre of wheat gittin' along fer harvest."

"Jonnie's wheat. Fer all I care, it could be sagebrush."

Rivers leaned forward. "What's the matter, hoss?" he asked softly. "Ain't that medicine of your'n workin'?"

"It ain't the medicine's fault. It ain't Jonnie's neither. And by gor it ain't mine!" Jim shifted irritably, picked up a leaf and began tearing it to pieces. "Farmin' jest ain't in me, Tom. I done the best I could fer four, five months now. Livin' in the cabin, workin' from sunup to evenin', holdin' in when I wanted to bust loose. And by thunder, I been wantin' to bust! Ever' time I look up and see them mountains yonder, with the snows gone and the way open, clean through—!"

He flung the leaf away and got up, wandering restlessly about the fire while Moki's yellow eyes watched every move. Tom lay very still, puffing quietly. Presently he murmured, "Four-five months. What about afore that?"

"Well—I reckon I warn't even tryin', afore that. Didn't know how. I kept doin' things Injun, like I was used to. My sister, she sure don't like Injuns. She—"

"You got a sister too?"

Jim smiled, thinking of the shining hair, the fierce little chin, and flying skirts. "Yeah. Sally. She's only fifteen. Prettiest little thing you ever saw."

"So you're the oldest. Why, hallelujah, Jim, you mean them three young 'uns come all the way from Missouri alone?"

"Not all the way." Jim came back and sat down. "Not all the way. My mother was with 'em when they started. Tom,

if only we'd been on the Sweetwater som'ers instead of on the Powder, I could've seen her afore she died."

He began to tell it all, then, at first slowly and with pauses to gather his thoughts, then more rapidly, reliving the whole thing as he described the snowy passes above the gorge, Dan'l's mutiny and his own tearing hunger, the journey's end by the still waters of the Tualatin. It was hard to explain the first taste of hoecake, and how he felt about the clock, but he made a stab at it. And the lonely, defiant weeks he'd spent in the tepee, the games with Dan'l, the beautiful rejected mare —he didn't skip anything. Most of all he talked about Sally and his brothers, trying to make Tom feel what he had felt, know them as he now did.

Especially Jonnie. "My brother, he's a wonder, Tom. He knows how the stick's floatin' when I git to feelin' itchy footed and no-account. He'll say, 'Jim, you take off huntin' today, I don't needja. Blast it now, git goin'.' He's figgered out how it is with me, though he don't never feel that way hisself. Ain't that somethin', now?"

"Yeah," said Rivers softly. "It's somethin'."

The pipe lay forgotten in his cupped hand, and his expression was hard to fathom. Jim sat up and rumpled Moki's ears. "It don't git no easier, all the same, stayin' put. I reckon it ain't never goin' to, fer a Injun like me."

"You ain't no Injun, hoss. Not any more."

"Mebbe not!" Jim burst out. "But I ain't no farmer, neither! Tom—" He paused, searching the older man's eyes with sudden hunger. "You said you heard they was still beaver back in South Park . . ."

Rivers' face changed. He spoke in a different tone, low and flat and tired. "Hoss, there likely ain't a word of truth in it. Stick to yer cabin. That medicine of your'n was a powerful lot stronger than I give it credit fer."

Puzzled and somehow uneasy, Jim studied the familiar

rugged profile, darkly outlined against the flames but quite unreadable. What did Tom mean? That he'd rather trap alone? Then why had he come a thousand miles out of his way to hunt up an old companion?

He shrugged the matter out of his mind and lay down to sleep. But he was still awake long after the fire had burned to crimson embers and the familiar humped shape next to him lay deep in sleep. There was something changed about his friend since they'd parted, nearly a year ago, by the banks of the Powder. But try as he would, he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

It continued to plague and elude him over the next month and a half; Tom "hung around" until September was all but gone. For Jim it was a strange period, in which the now familiar life in the valley, his family, the neighbors, his work around the claim, all took on a curious unreality, as if he knew them in a dream. His mind was absorbed with Tom, and his days, like an iceberg, were lived four-fifths below the surface, in a dark region where crosscurrents of thought and feeling, none of which he understood, tugged and strained deep inside himself.

Only one of the young Keaths failed to welcome Jim's friend wholeheartedly. The first morning they met, Jonnie and Tom had sized each other up and shaken hands on it, each thoroughly approving. Sally, too, was taken with Rivers' slow grin and easy drawl. Before he had been camped two days under the big oak where the tepee used to stand, she was treating him like an old friend of the family. She alternately pampered and bullied him, stuffing him with hoecake and venison, scolding him for his thin ribs, in a way that captivated him entirely.

Dan'l alone was unresponsive. Tom tried his best to make friends with the boy, hauling out his gaudiest yarns of scalp-

ings and escapes, presenting him with a knife that had once belonged to a Piegan chief. Dan'l accepted both tales and gift, torn between interest and hostility, but he remained aloof.

"Looks like I've lost my touch," Rivers remarked to Jim one day, not altogether humorously, as they watched the boy's uncompromising young back recede in the direction of the glades. "Fust thing you know Moki'll be growlin' at me. And when dogs and young 'uns turn agin a man, ain't much use wastin' the gunpowder to blow 'im to hallelujah."

"*Wagh!* You ain't that ornery yet! The boy's got some fool notion in his head, that's all."

"It's sartin he don't keer much fer the smell of my bait. Him and that squaw of mine." Rivers' grin twisted, as it so often did these days. "Mebbe they're both right."

Jim scoffed at him cheerfully, but the boy's attitude puzzled him, and he mentioned it to Jonathan, who had an answer for him immediately. "Why, blast it, Jim, you goin' blind? He's jealous, that's all. Scared Tom's gonna steal you away and take you back to trappin'." Jonnie hesitated. "You could set his mind at rest. I tried to, but it's been a long spell since I carried any weight with Dan'l. He don't believe me."

"*Wagh*, he'll git over it," murmured Jim vaguely. His gaze had wandered out over the fields and treetops to the haze-blued cone of Mount Hood. And he was no longer thinking about Dan'l.

Harvest time came and went without really breaking through his preoccupation. He took turns with Jonnie at wielding the great scythe, tied endless shocks of wheat, and swung the flail, without giving much attention to any of it except the surprising fact that Tom should be there too, working good-naturedly by his side. He did realize dimly as he stood at last beside his brother surveying the bulging sacks of grain, that it mattered to him after all, that this was wheat and not sage-brush. But he did not stop to examine the discovery, merely

noting that Jonnie's grin was good to see, and feeling somewhat repaid for all those weeks of tearing out stumps and scattering seed. Then he went to find Tom. With harvest done, there was nothing to prevent their roaming as they liked, searching the hills for game and the streams for beaver, racing Buckskin and Tucky hard and fast over the hills, and pretending there was nothing on their minds but the next meal.

They went to see Joe Meek. He was home this time—home and bursting to talk. The bellow of delight he let out when he glimpsed Tom was worth half a year's catch, as Tom said afterward; and the spate of food and drink and trapper's talk and roaring merriment that filled the afternoon and night was as good as a regular old-time rendezvous. But now again, almost against his will, Jim found himself watching Tom curiously, puzzling over what it was about him that had changed.

One evening at Rutledges', when all the neighbors round about had gathered to pool their suppers and celebrate the bountiful harvest, he almost put his finger on it, though not quite. It was a merry evening, redolent with the smells of venison and wood smoke, noisy with laughter and the shouts of children—the hubbub twined and woven through with the twinkling notes of Jonnie's banjo.

And after the feast a group of the men gathered, as they always did, to prop their worn boots on fence rail or wagon tongue, and smoke and talk. Rutledge was among them, and Mills and Burke and Sam Mullins and Jonnie and Ab Selway and Jim—and Tom. He stood leaning against the wagon wheel puffing his long red pipe—lithe and lean in a way no bourgeway ever achieved, his weather-beaten features half hidden by the veil of smoke. He seemed removed from the others, drawn apart, though he stood in their midst.

". . . thirty bushels to the acre," Mills was saying with satisfaction. "You wait. The folks back east ain't gonna stay there long with that kinda haul comin' in out here! I bet they's

wagons crossin' the Blues this minute, rollin' down them long rocky stretches to The Dalles, comin' through the gorge—"

"Man, I'm glad it ain't me," somebody muttered.

"They was wagons down to Oregon City yestiddy," Ab Selway offered. "Folks from away back yonder—Pennsylvania and Connecticut. Said they was hund'erds of folks piled up at The Dalles, waitin' on boats to take 'em through, and the boats are sceerce and the prices turrible. Reg'lar robbery, it's turned into."

"Why'n't they build theirselves rafts, like we done?"

"Why, shucks, the place is about stripped of timber by this time. Feller in the fust wagon, he told me they was talk of findin' a overland route—takin' the wagons right over them mountains."

There was an outburst of disbelief. "Why, crimeny, ain't no way through them mountains, ever'body knows that."

"You mean they's folks tryin' it?"

"They's some feller tryin' to take a bunch through. Name of Barlow. Hull crew of 'em'll be lost, a-course . . ."

"Mebbe not," put in Rutledge's deep voice suddenly. As always when Rutledge spoke, the others fell quiet. They all respected the huge, slow-spoken thoughtful man. "If they ain't no other way to get here," he went on, "I reckon they'll make it."

"But lord a'mighty, Mr. Rutledge," Jonnie said. "They say them slopes is straight up and down. And with the snow and all—seems impossible."

"Remember Windlass Hill, Jonnie? We all come down that, and by jiminy, *that* seemed impossible! Wasn't no pleasure jaunt fordin' the Snake this side of Fort Hall, neither." Rutledge turned thoughtfully to Tom. "What's your idee on it, Rivers? Think they's a way through them Cascades?"

"Fer a mountain goat, they is," Rivers drawled, scratching his cheek with the end of his long pipe stem. "Fer men on

hosses, they is. Jim and me done it onct, but then we cut our teeth on high country. I wouldn't say no bourgeway with a wagon could make it."

The faces around him changed a little; Jim could see the stubborn pride come awake in everyone. "Up till couple year ago folks said no wagon could get past Fort Hall," Mills reminded.

"Or acrost them deserts."

"Or through the gorge."

Rivers smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I know. But you ain't seen a certain hill just south of Mount Hood. Ain't nothin'll grow on it but a few little old laurels. Too steep. Ain't no wagon ever gonna make that, and they's no way around it."

The men heard him in silence, unable to contradict since they hadn't been there. But when the talk rose up again it was brisk and undismayed—about the new settlement called Portland, across from Fort Vancouver, where the Willamette joined the Columbia; about this year's crops and next year's plans; about the burgeoning new government and the possibility of statehood in the foreseeable future.

Rutledge talked quietly to Tom, asking questions and nodding courteously at the answers—but Jim wondered what was in the big man's mind, for his face was thoughtful as he studied Rivers. He *knew* what was in Tom's mind; it was all there to read. Tom was far away, riding along over some remembered wilderness. At that moment Jim came near to glimpsing what it was that troubled him about his friend; but Tom turned suddenly to laugh at something Rutledge said, and the impression vanished. Jim knew only that Tom Rivers was the loneliest man he had ever seen, and his knowledge grew until the hubbub around him faded and the gay crowds vanished, and there was nothing left in his mind but Tom and the old, good days, and his own fierce and overwhelming loyalty.

Three days later, when Tom Rivers rode quietly out of the clearing in the murky gray of dawn, Jim rode with him. His belongings were loaded in the old way on Bad Medicine's back, Moki raced alongside, and Buckskin's nose was pointed toward the high Cascades.

Chapter XVII

Jim and Tom moved into the heavy fir growth which cut off the last glimpse of the cabin. This was all so natural. It might have been last year, when they had made camp in that same clearing and left in a daybreak just like this to start for Sioux country and another season of trapping. Jim's mind was a corridor of closed doors, with only one flung open—the door to last year and the year before—the way back.

Sunrise was almost upon them when they reached the banks of the Willamette close by the falls. They found the old one-eyed Chinook ferryman, Iakhka Tcikeakh, lounging beside his hut with his arms folded and a look of sour disapproval on his usually stolid face.

"Come on, Jake, move them lazy moccasins and cast off," Jim told him. "We want to git acrost the river."

Jake's one eye rolled somberly in his direction, but he didn't stir. Patiently, Jim began to repeat his request in Chinook jargon, only to stop in the middle. Three canoes filled with Indians were making their way to the bank a couple of hundred yards below the falls. "Much people," he said in surprise.

Jake grunted. "Hyas tillicum," he agreed, then added, "Hyas masahchie!"

"Much evil? Who is this much bad people?"

"Umpqua."

"Oh." Jim's brow knotted impatiently; he understood now. Fort Vancouver had been full of Umpquas for a week, and so had Oregon City. It was their yearly trading expedition, which brought canoeload after canoeload of them down the Willamette from their villages far to the south. Evidently they were beginning to start homeward; small bunches of them would be portaging around the falls here all day and likely tomorrow, and Jake, who was a true Chinook and hated Umpquas, didn't like it. Jim, on the other hand, didn't like being delayed—not this close to the Tualatin, with the sun nearly up.

"*Wagh!* You scared they'll steal yer cabin while you ferry us?" he demanded of the old Indian. "Tom, you got anything to bribe him with? No sense wearin' the horses out swimmin' 'em when they's a boat right here."

"Hoss, I'm about as plum broke as a man kin git, but you might try 'im on these here beads. The Nez Perces like 'em."

Jim took the packet of blue beads and offered it to Jake, jabbering menacingly in Chinook jargon meanwhile, and making gestures of haste. Jake took the beads and after looking each one over separately, stowed them in his dirty sash. But they could not get him to budge until the three canoes were landed, hoisted to the heads of the paddlers, carried around the portage, and set afloat again above the falls. Then, at last, the old Chinook grunted and consented to man his ferry.

No more than half an hour had elapsed, in all, but the incident had marred Jim's dreamlike peace of mind. As they scrambled up the steep rise on the east side of the river and set off toward the mountains, he found himself hurrying Buckskin, turning out of his way to avoid passing familiar fields and the cabins of settlers he knew. The Umpquas were on his mind, too, touching him with vague uneasiness. They were a troublesome crew; Joe Meek's disciplinary sortie into their territory last month had been only one of many. And the faces Jim had observed as the straggling line passed by him on

the way around the portage had been harsh mouthed and sullen, with flat, blank eyes. He had heard the Umpquas kept slaves.

He shook himself free from his depression, irritably hustling Bad Medicine, who wanted mulishly to poke. Suppose they did keep slaves? Suppose they were ugly as Cayuses and mean as Apaches? They lived far away south and were going there as fast as they could. They'd bring no trouble to the cabin on the Tualatin.

"What the Sam Hill's eatin' you, hoss?" came Tom's amused complaint behind him. "That mare's going like her tail was afire. You in a hurry?"

Jim laughed and forced himself to a leisurely pace, trying to shut those troublesome doors tight again. He began reckoning their probable route ahead—four days, maybe five, across the Cascades just south of Mount Hood; over the Umatillas and along the Snake, south through Cache Valley and Brown's Hole.

They rode up, and up, and still up that day, through the thick forests and across the ever steepening ridges of the foothills. In the late afternoon they put Moki to work smelling out game for them, and roasted chunks of venison haunch over their campfire that night. It was more than a little chilly up here in the high country, and the fire glowed bright and comforting under the dark canopy of the firs; the meat was warm in Jim's belly and Tom's drawl was as slow and humorous as ever. Everything was the same, just as it used to be. But Jim was unaccountably restless; he got up so many times to check Buckskin's tether or relocate the mule or pad down to the nearby spring for a drink, that Moki, who sprang up each time to go with him, finally gave a little whining yawn of protest and flopped down rebelliously beside the fire.

Tom threw back his head and laughed until Jim had to grin. "By golly, hoss, I can't say's I blame the dog. You'll have him

wore out afore mornin', if you keep this up. What's eatin' you, boy? Yer jumpy as a prairie dog in a anthill. Somethin' on yer mind?"

"Naaa. Just can't settle down. Gimme my rifle yonder, Tom, I'll give it a cleanin'."

"You cleaned it twict a'ready, hoss. Wanta borry my pipe? Nothin' like a pipe fer puttin' a man to sleep."

But Jim only shook his head and rolled himself in the grizzly robe to lie staring into the fire. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

There was no hurrying the next day, because they were climbing in earnest now; the earth tilted up beneath the horses' feet until their path perforce became a zigzag back and forth across the reaching slopes. They camped on a sidehill strewn with boulders and huckleberry bushes, and were off at first light, their robes still fast around them to ward off the bite in the air. Up, and up—across a perilous ridge and up again through thinning trees. They were not far from the lofty spine of the Cascade range now—Mount Hood loomed huge and near on their left hand, its craggy peak thrusting high out of a wreath of mist.

It was still early morning on this third day when Jim thought he heard a shout. He reined in, staring in disbelief around the wild deserted scrub thickets and rocky slopes that were their trail. It was wilderness complete; not even Indians frequented this high country. There could be no one here to shout. But even as he started on, it came again—far-off and garbled, but unmistakably a human voice.

Tom pushed up beside him. "Hoss, am I goin' crazy, or do you hear that too?"

"I hear it, all right. And lookit Moki!"

The dog was standing rigid a little distance ahead, one foot upraised and ears stiffly cocked. He gave a gruff little bark and bounded forward.

"Might as well find out what's up," Tom said. "Looks like it's right on our way, anyhow."

Curious but wary, they rode on through the scrub and into a stand of fir. More noises began to drift to them—distant bangings and a curious sort of screeching; and as they drew nearer, an occasional bawl that sounded for all the world like cattle or oxen.

"What the *devil?*" muttered Tom. They made good time as they emerged from the trees and pounded briefly across a rocky level, then plunged into another tilted grove. The noises were plainer now, dominated by men's voices shouting some sort of orders. Tom and Jim burst out of the grove and pulled up short, for the earth had opened before them into a vast declivity—a canyon so deep the timber at its bottom looked dwarfed. It stretched on either hand as far as they could see; pitching steep enough down their own side but on the other rising almost sheer. They both recognized that opposite slope —it was the hill where the laurels grew, the most formidable barrier between them and the summit of the range.

But it was not at Laurel Hill they stared. Incredulous, their eyes were riveted on the object at its top—a familiar, sway-back object teetering on the very brink of that perilous drop.

It was a trail-worn bourgeway wagon.

Immediately the talk at Rutledge's flashed into Jim's mind. "By gor, they *are* comin' overland! The thunderin' fools—!" His eye traced a curious zigzag mark down the face of the slope. Tom saw it too.

"Good sufferin' catfish, hoss, one of em's done it a'ready, or I can't read sign! Lookee there!" He pointed downward; there, far below, a stained canvas top crept across the timbered floor of the canyon like a stubby caterpillar crawling through grass.

"By gor!" Jim whispered. "By thunder—" He lapsed incoherently into Crow, feeling an excitement different from

any he had ever known. His eyes snapped upward to the wagon at the top. It had moved; the four oxen were already over the brink, struggling in a wide diagonal down the face of the drop. Jim stiffened with dread; it looked like suicide. But forward came the wagon, over the brink. It tilted crazily, swayed and lurched and bounced, but somehow stayed upright. As it drew away from the crest, the tiny figure of a man came slipping and sliding on the upward side of the oxen, leaning almost horizontal as he braced his weight against the animals' guide ropes; a huge tree had been chained to the rear axle to drag behind and act as brake.

What would have happened without the tree Jim could only guess. Even with it, there was no controlling that top-heavy vehicle once the hill claimed it. The oxen scrambled and slid and skidded faster and faster in a frantic effort to escape the weight which bore down on them relentlessly, banging and bumping and careening at their heels. By the time they were halfway down the slope their progress had turned into a headlong rush, raising clouds of dust so thick it almost obscured the scene, filling the air with a wild confusion of noises—oxen's bawling and men's hoarse yells, the piercing squeal of wagon wheels, and the crash of limbs as they were ripped off the dragged tree and flew spinning into the air.

It was an act of chaos and daring, of courage so reckless that it etched itself on Jim's mind never to be erased. He sat rigid on his fidgeting mare, as unconscious of his fingers knotting on the halter as he was of Tom's soft and constant swearing at his side.

Then suddenly it was over—the dust settled and there was the wagon motionless near the foot of the slope, where a great tree lay directly across its path. A faint cheer rose from the top of Laurel Hill, and looking up again, Jim saw a line of people at the brink—children, women, men. A bunch of cattle and horses were even now being prodded over the edge to

start their scrambling way downward; another wagon loomed behind them, and he knew there were more behind it. These bourgeways! They fought the country—but they conquered it. Stubborn, brave, magnificent fools, who didn't know an impossibility when they saw one. Fools? They were heroes! They had a medicine so big nothing could withstand it.

Nothing could withstand it . . . Suddenly the scene before Jim's eyes was blotted out, and another rose. He saw the vast sweep of the Plains, with wagons like this everywhere—crawling in little clouds of dust over every corner of the continent, turning off south and north to halt on plateaus, to seek out valleys, to swarm among mountains—to penetrate even the wild fastnesses of Absaroka. And everywhere they stopped, cabins mushroomed, gardens sprouted, dark furrows laid their stripes across the earth. Indians were crowded backward, bunched and milling; buffalo herds were scattered and slain and gone, and the prairies were no longer empty but teeming with life; towns sprang up to obliterate lonely graves, cattle fed where once the coyote howled.

The vision was gone almost before he glimpsed it, but its effect was staggering. Breathing hard and blinking, feeling the little hairs rise on the back of his neck, Jim shook himself back to the present. He felt as if everything were suddenly different, himself changed in some way he could not fathom, the whole world new. Yet only an instant had passed; the cattle were still scrambling down the slope yonder, the dust still settling below.

Tom gave a sudden whoop of delight and pointed downward. The wagon which had just made the furious descent stood deserted, its tongue lolling, while the man slapped his oxen angrily into place beside the great tree that barred his way. He roped the beasts to it, every motion one of exasperation, and they dragged it laboriously out of the way. Hitched to the wagon once more, they lumbered the remaining fifty

yards down the slope and pulled up short on level ground, halted by the weight of the tree still dragging behind their own load. Instantly the man was off the high seat and cutting the tree free. Serenely leaving it in exactly the same spot as the log which had so angered him, he resumed his seat and the wagon disappeared into the timber.

Tom threw back his head and roared. "I knowed it! You watch, hoss! The next 'un down'll do the same doggone thing! By golly, if that ain't human nature . . ."

Jim never knew how long it was they stayed there, watching. He didn't even notice when Bad Medicine lay down, pack and all, in the middle of the trail. But by the time they finally nudged and prodded and kicked him to his unwilling feet, and started their horses down the near side of the canyon, the first two wagons were straining up it. Three more squealed faintly far below, crossing the timbered floor.

As Jim and Tom moved down parallel to the second wagon, its owner spotted them and hailed. Riding ahead of Tom, Jim ordered Moki to keep the mule on his feet and cut across the incline at an angle, intercepting the wagon on a slanting shelf. The man ran forward eagerly.

"You comin' from west'ard?" he demanded.

"Yep."

"Willamette Valley?"

"Yep."

"By gollies! Is it fer, boy?"

Jim shook his head. "Four, five days, in a wagon. Mebbe less."

"Four days! Y'hear that Martha?" The man yelled jubilantly into the wagon. "Four, five days, we'll *be* there!" He swung back to Jim. "Say, boy, is it all they say 'tis? The land and all? Can a man make a livin'?"

There was nothing you'd ever notice about this man. He

was undersized and scrawny, with a face you'd never be able to pick out in a crowd. Farmer, bourgeway, nobody—he was just another man. Yet with his own eyes Jim had watched him beat his oxen over that drop, slip, and slide and curse his way down beside them, fight the very mountain itself, and do the impossible.

"You'll do a'right, mister," he said huskily. "You'll do fine. They's a good valley down yonder, best I ever see. And plenty folks just like you. By gor, it's wuth the trip!"

He wheeled his mare and plunged on down the slope, the upthrust treetops swimming suddenly in a watery blur as his mind filled with Jonnie's face and a cabin on the Tualatin.

He never remembered much about the next couple of hours. Somehow he and Tom scrambled up Laurel Hill, crossed the ridge beyond, and rode up and on through layers of swirling mist. Mount Hood, towering huge and close to the left of them, appeared and reappeared through the vapor like a gigantic phantom. Jim rode unseeing, his own thoughts swirling in a misty confusion of images and voices—the wagon careening down Laurel Hill, Sally's shining hair and fierce little profile, Dan'l's eager laughter, fields deep with grain where forests once stood; Rutledge's deep voice saying, "If there ain't no other way to get here, I reckon they'll make it . . ." and Meek's, "Why, hallelujah, I dunno what, boy, but somethin' *big*. Ain't you seen them wagons comin' over the plains?" So Meek had glimpsed that vision too! It was big, by gor, it was bigger than all outdoors! And Jonnie had seen it all along. Clear as sudden daybreak, Jim remembered his black eyes blaze with it, heard his voice saying, "Why, this is *home*. It's what we come all this way to get!"

And here was Jim Keath leaving it.

Suddenly the confusion was gone from his mind. He didn't know he'd halted his beasts until Tom came pushing back through the clouds of mist toward him.

"What's the matter, hoss? That cussed mule actin' up agin?"

Jim sat without moving or speaking. Then suddenly he said, "Tom, let's go back."

"Go back?" Tom nudged Tucky closer, peering intently into Jim's face. Slowly his own changed, and a slackness crept over his body. He looked down at his thumbnail, smiling a little. "I wondered when you was gonna find out," he said quietly.

"Find out what?"

"That you belonged right whar you was—back yonder."

"You knowed it?" Jim faltered.

"Why, sure I knowed it. Knowed it fust night I saw you, and heerd you talk about it—about yer brother and all. I even told you, hoss, if you'll just think back."

Jim thought, and remembered. "Tom, I didn't know what you meant. I thought mebbe you was sayin' you'd ruther trap alone."

Rivers gave a short, soft laugh. "I reckon that's why I climbed a couple mountain ranges to hunt you up! No, but onct I found you, I knowed how your stick was floatin'. You're dead right, Jim. Go back."

"By thunder, you'll come too!"

Tom smiled again, slowly shaking his head. There was complete finality in the gesture. "Nope, hoss, I tried it, but it ain't my trail. When a man's spent twenty year beaverin', I reckon he's ruint fer anything else."

Jim stared in silence at the lean, tough figure with its battered hat, dark against the rolling white vapor. "That's it, then?"

"That's it, hoss," Tom said easily.

A swirl of mist drifted between them, blurring the trapper's outlines until he seemed almost to dissolve like a ghost, lacking all solid substance. And a ghost he was, Jim realized slowly—a man whose day was past, whose way of life had

vanished, heading back to a world which no longer existed. He knew now what had bothered him so these last weeks—why Tom moved alone through the noisiest crowd.

A soft laugh broke into his thoughts. "Sho, boy, don't look like that. Climb off and we'll have us a farewell feed, and a smoke fer luck."

Jim obeyed, but he couldn't respond to the other's drawling banter; the jerky choked him, and the smoke Tom puffed to east and west and north and south melted eerily into the fog. Too soon they rose and mounted once more, and the moment had come.

"Now listen, hoss," Tom said. "It ain't forever. I'll likely wander out this way next summer, less'n some Blackfoot gits me fust."

"Ain't the Blackfoot lives that's fast enough to git you, Tom."

Rivers grinned and wheeled his horse. "It might take two of 'em," he drawled. He gathered his reins, his face suddenly bleak. "Good huntin', Jim. Take keer of that medicine. It's done a powerful big magic."

He raised a hand in farewell, and Jim returned the gesture without trusting his voice to speak. Tucky's hoofs rang on the mist-wet rock; man and horse moved away, and Jim watched until they vanished into the drifting layers of white. The faint jingling of traps floated back on a wisp of breeze; then even that faded. Jim stood alone in swirling emptiness.

Slowly he turned and started down the mountain. Tom would come back next summer, and the summer after, and the summer after—each time more ghostlike and remote; then the summer would come that failed to bring him. And it would be clear that at last some Blackfoot or Comanche—or maybe two—had been faster than Tom Rivers.

Slowly, out of his desolation, a certain quiet settled over Jim. Why struggle against what couldn't be changed? That

was the life Tom wanted, the death he would choose. A man seldom got more, and many a man not half so much. As for himself, he was through looking backward. He and Tom had parted once more in high country, but this time each was sure of his trail—that was the difference.

He rode on, downward and downward now, through the thinning mists and into brilliant sunlight. Below him stretched a vast and slanting landscape, deep with timber, easing into the gentler slopes of foothills and finally leveling off into the valley he knew he loved as he had never loved a place before. And far off yonder flowed the still waters of the Tualatin, and in a cabin on its banks were three people who meant more to him than all his wild and lonely freedom.

My valley, he thought. My people. Home.

A dark and glorious music rose up inside him as he looked —like thunder, like rolling clouds, like rivers and drums and running horses, all of it shot through with the bright, quick notes of Jonnie's banjo. It filled him, spilled over into a shout of joy that echoed down through the forest; it brought his heels back against Buckskin's sides with a kick that sent her scrambling and sliding in a wild rush down the mountainside with the mule stumbling behind. The way would be swift, now that they were racing downward instead of toiling up —now that they were going home.

The music still echoed in his ears as he stood on the east bank of the Willamette just five mornings after he had quitted it, and shouted joyfully across the river to Jake. It rang all around him as he spurted off the ferry on the other side and plunged through the tangle of oaks and wild plum that bordered the Mills' claim. It drowned the thudding of the animals' hoofs and Moki's excited barking and the pounding of his own heart as he sped through the last familiar stretch of wood and into the clearing, sliding to the ground just as Sally

emerged from the doorway of the cabin, Mrs. Rutledge and the twins behind her.

She stopped short, and he came toward her eagerly. "Sally, I'm back. I—"

Then he stopped too, and the music broke off in a crashing discord. Her eyes were red from weeping, her usually volatile little face dull and weary. She stood with shoulders sagging and hands limp at her sides.

"So you're back," she echoed. "Well, you're too late. He's gone."

"Gone? Who's gone?"

"Dan'l."

"Dan'l? Gone *where?* What in thunder—"

"Nobody knows where!" she burst out. Suddenly she began to cry. "If we knew, you think we'd waste time huntin' through ever' Injun camp this side of—"

"*Injun* camp? Blast it, tell me what you're talkin' about!"

"Dan'l's what I'm talkin' about!" she almost screamed at him. Her hands clenched with fury. "You just rode away and left him, Jim Keath, you went off without sayin' one word and it like to broke his heart! Day before yesterday we woke up and he was gone. They was only this—"

She thrust her fist out toward him and opened it; on the palm lay a crumpled piece of deerskin, covered with Dan'l's sprawling, flourishing writing.

"Yes, I'll read it to you," she flung at him, her scorn so like a lash that he went rigid under it. She spread the scrap of hide in hands that shook convulsively, as did her voice. " 'Dear Jonnie and Sis. Don't try to find me. I have gone away like Jim done—to be a Injun.' And Jonnie and the men huntin' ever' Injun town to Fort Vancouver for three days and nights and not a sign of him! They're up at Mullinses now gettin' food and fresh horses to hunt some more but they can't find him, oh they can't find him!" She buried her face in her hands

suddenly, the words breaking into sobs. "See what you done, Jim Keath! I wish we'd never seen you!"

Slowly, painfully, Jim gathered the tattered remnants of his thoughts and forced them into some sort of coherence. "I—know whar he is," he muttered. Her head lifted, her eyes wildly questioning. He nodded. "He's got to be. Ain't no other way to—"

He broke off, moistening his dry lips, while he struggled to make plans.

"Go to Mullinses," he said hoarsely. "Go fast. I'll leave the mule. Tell Jonnie I've gone to git the boy back—south'ard along the river—they kin foller if they want."

He wheeled and ran for Buckskin, not waiting to see how she took it or what she did. Back he pounded through the woods he had ridden through so joyously a few moments before. But this time his hands were like ice and his mouth dry with fear, one terrible picture before his eyes—a line of sullen Indians with flat, blank eyes carrying their canoes around the portage.

The Umpquas—who kept slaves.

Chapter XVIII

It was the hour before dawn. The river lay faintly luminous in starlight, just pale enough to reveal the thin black shapes of five canoes drawn up half into the bushes on the shore. On the sands of the little hidden cove nearby, the Umpqua camp—a cluster of silent hutlike shelters ranged around a dying fire—slept peacefully, secure in its concealment and its sentries.

And fifty yards away, at the top of the embankment which ringed the cove, the young Crow warrior, Talks Alone, lay belly down among the weeds and darkness, watching those two blanket-wrapped figures as a panther watches his prey.

White Jim Keath had vanished during the past terrible thirty-six hours of riding and searching and riding once more, blind with hate and frantic with the too vivid pictures that filled his brain. There was nothing of Jim Keath left at all in the painted face and glaring eyes of this naked savage. He watched the sentries, and in his mind he saw them sprawling under a knife thrust, clawing helplessly at arrows in their throats.

How could he best kill them, both at once, and without a sound? One squatted near the fire, which was no more than a nest of rose-red embers; the other hunched, a shadow among shadows, in the lee of the largest makeshift hut. Neither had

made a move during the span of time that Jim had watched them, yet he could not be sure they were both asleep.

A little flame leaped up from the pile of coals, glinted on the fish heads that littered the sands around it, flickered briefly over the hard jaw and beady black eye of the nearest sentry. That one was far from asleep. Well, no matter. He would sleep soon—and long.

Stealthily Jim rose, one quieting hand on Moki who trembled by his side. He had left his rifle back yonder in the trees where Buckskin waited, for he could use only silent weapons tonight. He reached for his bow, then allowed Moki to press forward with him to the edge of the embankment. It fell off steeply, for a distance of about his own height, then sloped to the floor of the cove and the dense blackness of two trees.

Gingerly, he lowered himself over the edge, and dropped. A gray wraith that was Moki leaped beside him; both scrambled soundlessly down the slide of soft dirt and melted into the blur of dark beneath the trees. At the farthest edge of that blur Jim dropped to one knee, flipping an arrow to his bow. Then he pointed to the sentry beside the fire.

"Kill, Moki!" he breathed.

His stiffened arm and the curve of the bow made a black frame against the fire's radiance; through it he watched the dog slink toward the nearer guard. Then his own eye snapped to the farther one, by the hut. Feathers brushed his cheek as he took careful aim, the bowstring taut against his thumb, every nerve end quivering as he waited for the flash of movement that would tell him Moki had sprung.

It came. His thumb snapped straight; the soft *whang* of the arrow seemed to fill the night. Before the sound had faded he was on his feet, running across the sand to the struggling figures beside the fire. A plunge of his knife and all was still; he wrenched Moki loose and half threw him toward the embankment with a guttural command. Waiting only until the dog

started obediently up the bank toward Buckskin, he bent swiftly, plucked a glowing brand from the fire and sprang toward the biggest hut.

The sentry outside it was dead, as Jim had gambled he would be; he slumped, head lolling, beside the door flap, a feathered shaft sprouting from his breast. The bigger gamble was that his presence here meant Dan'l was in this hut. Jim's jaw clamped, his fingers sought the medicine bundle tied to his braid before he raised the flap and stepped into the black interior.

In a fir grove some miles to the north, Jonnie sat numb with fatigue upon his borrowed horse, while for the hundredth time since sundown he watched Joe Meek slide down from his black stallion and go poking with a torch into the trees ahead.

Would they ever catch up, Jonnie wondered. Could Meek actually follow Jim's trail at night, no matter how plain the sign? Most doubtful of all, had Jim himself guessed right? Nobody could know—maybe Dan'l was a hundred miles away from here; across the Columbia, up into the Coast range, somewhere far to the east.

Feeling the knots of panic jerk tight again inside him, he rested an arm on his saddle horn and put his head down, forcing himself to relax. Jim knew, he must know; and Meek would find him. Nothing to do but trust both of them blindly.

Behind him he could hear the restless movements of the other horses, the faint squeak of leather and the rustle of underbrush, the low voices of the men—Mills, Burke, Rutledge, Ab Selway, Sam. His heart went out to them, suddenly and wholly. What would he have done without his friends these past four days!

His tired mind flitted anxiously to Sally, waiting alone and fearful back at the cabin. But no, she wasn't alone. Mrs. Rut-

ledge wouldn't leave her for a minute, nor the others. He could count on that. It was Dan'l who was alone. The boy's image filled his mind—the curly head, the clear eyes wild with grief because Jim was gone. Why didn't I see it comin'! Jonnie thought for the thousandth time. Why didn't I say somethin', do somethin'! Why did I ever want to find Jim again in the first place . . . And he knew it was because of a heart-sick day nearly ten years past when he, like Dan'l, had awakened to find Jim gone. All those years it had hurt, he had wanted his brother back. Well, he'd had him, for a while, but the price was dear. He'd lost them both now.

He jerked up his head, dragging a hand across his eyes, realizing dimly that Rutledge's horse had pushed up beside him.

"Take it easy, Jonnie," the deep voice came out of the gloom. "Jim's doin' all he can to right the damage."

"I wonder if he even knows he done it."

"I reckon he knows plainer than you, by this time, son. I got a idee he's seein' ever'thing mighty turrible clear—watchin' Dan'l start in to muddle up his life same way he muddled up his own. Nothin' like that to open a feller's eyes. Be glad you ain't him, Jonnie. He's feelin' ever'thing you are, and a lot more besides."

Slowly the bitterness drained away, leaving only weariness. "If only we can find 'em," Jonnie muttered.

Meek came back, grim, as he had been since the instant Sally burst into the Mullins' cabin yesterday morning to gasp out Jim's message. Then, he'd exploded, "The Umpquas! By the almighty, why didn't I guess it! Let's go, men, hurry."

Now he said, "We're gainin'. No more'n a hour behind him. I got a notion now where they might be campin', them cussed fish-eatin' coyotes! I'll lodgepole ever' man jack of 'em."

He leaped to the saddle and started headlong through the

trees, his torch held high. Jonnie spurred after him, ignoring the aching soreness of every muscle, his ears full of the thud of hoofs behind him, following the bobbing flare in front.

The torch Jim held—the smoldering branch yanked from the fire—gave but a feeble light in the hut's black interior, which reeked of fish and unwashed bodies. He thrust it here and there over blanket-wrapped shapes, half frantic with the need to see and the equally urgent need for caution. Hatred for those sleeping figures rose up in him—a craving to kick and yank them out of his way, fling them aside like so many rags until he found the one small bundle he wanted.

Something glinted suddenly in a far corner. Jim thrust the torch out, caught the unmistakable gleam of golden hair. Next instant he was leaping over the shadowy figures toward it, cursing the sudden uncontrollable trembling of his legs that threatened to sprawl him straight on top of some sleeping Umpqua. Stooping, he lifted an edge of blanket from the glinting hair, then sank to his knees. It was Dan'l. Dan'l with smudged and tear-streaked face, sleeping tired and helpless with his bound wrists pillowing his cheek.

It was fury that gave Jim back his strength and conquered the trembling—fury at the thong that bound those wrists, at the whole treacherous crew that slept around him. Swiftly he stretched out a hand now cool and steady, clamped it over the boy's mouth. The gray-green eyes flew open, and their first glazed, wild look of terror nearly unmanned Jim again, it told so plainly what these last two days had been. But he held the torch close, and the look faded to bewilderment, then blazed again with incredulous joy. The boy's eyes brimmed with sudden tears, and Jim gently took away his hand.

His knife was out, slicing that thong as if it were a captor's throat. Then his wrists freed, Dan'l sat up and pointed to his

ankles. They were bound too, but not for long. Jim chafed the swollen flesh, wondering if the boy would be able to walk.

Well, he had to. A huddled figure nearby stirred restlessly and turned over, uttering a sigh that stank of fish. Jim thought fast. How long had it been now, that he'd been prowling about this hut? Three minutes? Four?

He hoisted the boy to his feet and stood supporting him, holding his brand on a sudden impulse toward the pegged-down hides that formed the wall of the hut. Good! The rawhide rope was plainly visible. He ground out the torch against the earthen floor and stooped once more; a flash of his knife and he was lifting the loosened skins and drawing the boy outside into the fragrant air of night. But with the first step Dan'l gave a sharp little moan of pain. It was quickly stifled, but Jim's anxiety redoubled. If the Umpquas were light sleepers . . . He felt Dan'l stumble and he tightened his grasp on his arm, worrying about those thong-numbed ankles. Then they were around the hut somehow, and running across the open toward the embankment and safety.

But Dan'l stumbled again, staggered, and half went down. Jim whirled and lifted him—and heard a cry of alarm from the hut they had just quitted.

"Oh, Jim, they've waked up—" gasped Dan'l.

Jim didn't wait to find out what would happen. As a babble of voices broke out behind him he slung the boy over his shoulder and, staggering under the added weight, ran for the embankment. Figures erupted from this hut and that amid answering yells; torches bloomed. But Jim was under the two trees now, stumbling across the pool of blackness and out on the far side to scramble up the crumbling slope.

He dug his moccasined toes into the soft earth, feeling his calf muscles knot and the dirt give way beneath him. But still he clambered, half dragging and half pushing the boy, who was doing his best to help. Below, a shot rang out, then two

more, in rapid succession, over the uproar of yells and running feet. As Jim gained the slope's top a bullet sang close by his ear and thudded into the earth beside him. Gasping for breath, he seized the boy and hoisted him up the sheer lip of the embankment, felt him clutch at the bushes above and knew the lessening of his weight as he wriggled half over the top. It was all but done. He bunched his muscles for his own leap—and the world exploded into a blaze of spinning lights as something crashed against the side of his head.

For what seemed an age he teetered there enveloped in noise, feeling his hands numb and his eyes glaze and his body tilt slowly backward. "Run Dan'l! Find Buckskin—" he tried to yell, but could not hear his own voice. Then the night whirled past and he was falling, tumbling and somersaulting, through a garbled, screaming uproar into a deep black well of silence.

Jim awoke to find himself bound hand and foot, face down in sand and brambles, with the world full of pain. Where was this place, and what had happened? Staring dazedly at the crushed leaves an inch from his eye, he realized they were visible in the first dim gray light of morning. Guttural voices came to his ears from somewhere off to the right, and the sound of a fire crackling and feet moving about. A whiff of frying fish brought the saliva flooding into his mouth. Dizzy with hunger, he struggled to clear away the layers of fog in his brain. A slight movement of his eyes brought a flash of deeper pain. Memory came back in a rush, and with it, sinking dread. He was still in the Umpqua camp, and it was morning. Had Dan'l got away?

Cautiously he lifted his head just enough to turn on his left cheek. The vicious throbbing that filled the whole side of his head at the movement sent him momentarily slipping back into that dizzy blackness; but in a moment he opened his eyes

once more. On the sand not two feet away lay Dan'l, prone and trussed up just as he himself was.

So all his efforts had come to nothing. Jim felt tired to his very bones. What a mess he'd made of everything, what trouble he'd set in motion the day he'd turned his back on Powder River and ridden westward to The Dalles! But no, the trouble had started long before that. Its roots stretched back to Absaroka, back to that grizzly—back, back to that long ago, fatal morning he'd run away from home. And now, today, the wreckage was complete.

He heaved a sigh that tangled painfully in his throat. Instantly there was a stirring nearby, a tremulous "Jim!" He raised his eyes to meet the wide, incredulous ones of the boy, who had wriggled around to face him.

"Oh, cracky, Jim, I thought you was dead!"

"Not yet I ain't."

"Oh, lordy, I'm so glad, oh Jim I'm so awful glad!" Dan'l's lips quivered, but Jim saw the kindling of new hope on his face.

He figgers I kin git him out of this, Jim thought. Even now. Even tied up like a trussed deer, with a bullet furrow in my skull. Blast it, them devils might as well've finished me off fer all the good I kin do him now—

It made him sicker than ever, the knowledge that he must lie helpless and watch the boy's hope fade away, the trust in his eyes cloud over with disillusion.

He'll find out what I'm worth, all right, Jim thought bitterly. It won't be long.

"They're eatin' breakfast, Jim, and gettin' ready to leave," the boy whispered. "How we gonna get loose?"

"I dunno, Dan'l."

"Do they mean to take you in the canoes along o' me?"

"I reckon so."

He knew so. He'd already figured out why he was still alive—they were saving him for the kind of thing he'd watched sometimes in Absaroka, when a swift death was deemed too good for some arrogant enemy. What Indians did to white men was nothing to what they did to each other when the occasion warranted. Well, he'd show the boy he could die well, anyway. Scalp Necklace's rigid training would not be wasted; these coyotes would get no satisfaction out of a Crow.

"You got a plan yet, Jim?"

"Not yet. I'll think of somethin'."

He closed his eyes again, cursing himself for a coward. He should tell the boy the truth, to let him go on hoping was only another form of torture.

A kick landed in his middle, and he glared up into the malevolent face of an Umpqua chieftain. He wore a red blanket striped with black, and a bone through each braid. He kicked again, viciously, snarling something in his throaty dialect and pointing behind him. Probably talking about those dead sentries, and painting lurid pictures of what was to come. Jim spat out some equally lurid remarks in Crow and ignored a third kick, harder than the others, which filled his head with that savage throbbing.

Next minute the Umpqua had beckoned one of the sullen-faced warriors, who without further ado slung Dan'l over his shoulder like a sack of meal and vanished in the direction of the river.

The suddenness of it shocked Jim out of his mental torpor. Abruptly he was raging mad, determined to get them both out of this fix whether it was impossible or not. His brain began to work frantically, and as soon as the chieftain had strolled away his hands were straining at their thongs. Now that Dan'l had been removed he could see the activities be-

yond, and realized that the camp was nearly ready to travel. The sky had lightened while he lay there unresisting, and daybreak was upon them. He had five minutes at the most.

He hadn't even ten seconds. At that instant the warrior reappeared, accompanied by another. The next Jim was hoisted between them and carted down the sloping sands to the river. There he was dumped headlong into the bottom of a canoe and left, bruised and throbbing.

For precious moments he was so blindly dizzy he could do nothing at all. Then at last he managed to roll to his side and drag himself to a sitting position. For his pains he got a moccasined foot in his face that sent him crashing back again. He lay still, the sweat pouring off him as he fought back nausea. So there was somebody else in the canoe. A guard. He'd have to think fast how to dispose of him.

Suddenly there came a shout from somewhere back in the cove. Before he could decide what it meant he heard hurrying footsteps and saw through slitted eyelids that one of the warriors was running full speed down the sands. The canoe rocked as the man seized it, pushing it under a mass of overhanging bushes as he hissed some message to Jim's guard. Then he vanished, and the guard dropped forward to kneel astride Jim, clamping a fish-reeking hand over his mouth.

Now what? Frantically Jim cast about in his brain for an answer. What was happening up there on shore? What *could* be happening to make them suddenly—

Then he heard it—a loud, familiar bellow. "By thunder, you better savvy where they're at! I'll take it out'n yer hide, you flea-bit, fish-eatin', child-stealin', trouble-makin' coyote! I got the law of this hull thunderin' valley behind me, understand? And the United States gov'ment behind that! By golly, I want that boy and the feller that come after 'im! I want—"

The bellow switched over to no less threatening Chinook jargon, and the chieftain's harsh voice answered protestingly

in the same tongue. Several things took place simultaneously in Jim's brain. He remembered his own words sending Sally to Mullins'—"*Tell Jonnie . . . south'ard along the river . . . they kin foller if they want*"—and he heard the unmistakable sound of bourgeway boots crashing through the underbrush atop the embankment, and he knew he'd have a knife in his heart in another minute—and so might Dan'l—unless he could immediately give the show away past all concealing.

There was only one reckless thing to do, and he did it. At the instant the chieftain was swearing there had never been a boy, and that the Indian who had broken into the camp last night was unfortunately dead, Jim brought both his knees up hard into the crouching guard's belly and with a violent twist sent him over the side. Before the splash had settled he was struggling to sit up, yelling "*Meek!*" with all the power of his lungs.

The chieftain's voice had choked off. Now footsteps pounded down the sands, accompanied by a babble of noise over which Meek's roar rose triumphant. "Dead, is he? By golly, it's a mighty lively corpse can yell like *that!*"

The guard's head popped up out of the water, but Jim was ready for him, bringing his bound wrists down with smashing force. By the time the head came up again Meek was splashing through the shallows. With an instant and expert grasp of the situation he sent the guard under once more with a well-aimed toe, then yanked the canoe into the open.

On the beach the Umpquas were scattering in all directions, but Jim didn't watch what became of them. He gasped, "Cut me loose, Meek!" and an instant later was staggering across the graveled shallows to another clump of trailing bushes. Meek understood his intention and splashed ahead of him, but Jonnie had beat them both. He pushed out of the branches as they got there, and he had Dan'l in his arms.

"He's all right, he ain't hurt," he told them shakily. "Let's

have that knife, Meek. Them blasted varmints gagged 'im as well as tied 'im."

And so it was finished, and the impossible had been done, and Dan'l was sobbing with excitement in Jonnie's arms. And Jim, swaying from dizziness and that throbbing in his head, was too tired to wonder what Jonnie was thinking of him.

Meek drew Jim aside as the other men crowded around the boy and Jonnie. "Can you travel, Jim?" he asked quietly.

"Sure, let's git started."

"Man, you done a job last night. I never even thought of them varmints. It mighta been weeks—"

"I made a mess of it."

"The devil you did! That bullet mighty nigh made a mess of you, though. I reckon they didn't bother to feed you?"

"No."

"Then come on. I got jerky in my possibles, onct we git up to where we left the hosses."

They scaled the embankment in silence, the others following. At the top Meek turned to look at Jim, and spoke again. "I reckon they ain't but one way to keep ahead of you in these Injun troubles, boy, and that's to git you on my side. You're a prime tracker, Jim, and jest my meat fer chasin' wolves. Lemme know when you git over that there headache, and I'll have you sworn in as deputy. If you want it, you got a job."

Jim stared at him dazedly, remembering a shining vision of thudding hoofs and a fine brass badge. What a difference this might have made to him, only two weeks ago! The difference between going and staying. But now it was too late. The only thing left that he could do for his brothers and Sally was to get out—go far, far away where he could never hurt them again.

"Thanks, Meek," he muttered. "But onct we git the boy home I'm headin' east. Fer good."

Chapter XIX

Under a bright midmorning sun three days later, Jim, Jonathan, Dan'l, and Mr. Rutledge rode into the clearing beside the Tualatin. Meek and the others had already scattered for their own claims to spread the news that the boy was safely home; Jonnie had shouted it at the top of his lungs as soon as they were in earshot of the cabin. Almost before he reined his horse to a halt Sally was at his stirrup, laughing and crying at once as she pulled Dan'l down into her arms and held him as if she never meant to let him go. Mrs. Rutledge and the twins were only seconds behind her, and for a few moments the little runaway was all but smothered by the swirling skirts and joyous, tearful babble that surrounded him.

Jim looked on silently, thinking by how slim a margin this scene had missed being one of tragedy. His paint was gone long since, his fringed shirt covered the bronzed, scarred body of Talks Alone; the medicine bundle no longer swung on his braid but rested deep in the hidden darkness of his pouch. He was Jim Keath again, his face a little haggard from three days of wearing that savage throbbing down to a dull ache, but his mind more resolved than ever on what he knew he must do.

He waited until Dan'l was well launched on a breathless

recital of all that had happened in the past fearful week. Then he drew Jonnie aside.

"I'm leavin' now," he said quietly.

"You're doin' what?"

"I'm leavin'. Tell Sally ever'thing she said is true, and I know it. Tell her—"

"Whydon't you tell her yourself?" Jonnie said.

"Thunder, I couldn't face her. She hates the sight of me."

Jonathan was silent a moment. From the group around Dan'l, Sally's voice floated to them clearly. ". . . can just thank our stars for Jim, that's all! If it hadn't been for him . . ."

"It don't sound much like she hates you," Jonnie said.

"You didn't hear her the other day, when I fust come back. She's dead right, too. Been better if you'd never seed me—"

"I don't feel that way about it."

"Well, you oughta."

"No, I oughtn't! Jim, lookee here. You headed out of here last week for good and all, you know you did. Yet you turned around and come back. Why? You tell me why!"

Jim thought of Laurel Hill and the new world he'd envisioned as he watched the wagons; of Tom dissolving wraithlike into the misty past and himself riding joyously down the mountain toward a future he'd finally glimpsed. Jonnie was making this mighty hard. There were things you couldn't explain, things you couldn't bear to talk about.

"No use tellin' you why, Jonnie. I just wanted to come back. And now I wanta go."

"You're lyin'. You don't want to go no more'n I do."

Jim spoke desperately. "Never mind what I want! You seen what I done to the boy—I got to get out, go far away from him, so's he'll fergit all about me. Looks to me like the only thing I kin do!"

"It looks to me," said Jonnie slowly, "like runnin' away again."

Jim shook his head violently, his thoughts in a tangle, his whole will concentrated on hanging on to that one clear decision. "I'm goin', that's all," he muttered, and turned away.

But Jonnie caught his arm. "All right," he snapped. "But you ain't gonna go without tellin' Dan'l. Not again, you ain't!"

Before Jim could stop him he raised his voice. "Dan'l! Come over here. Jim's got somethin' to say to you."

Dan'l detached himself from the group around him and ran eagerly across the grass. Then he was standing there, waiting and Jim had to say something.

"Dan'l—" he began, half choking on it. He looked down into the snub-nosed, inquisitive small face with its wide, clear eyes, and knew he had to make him understand the whole thing, once and for all. He dropped down on his haunches before the boy, seizing his shoulders.

"Dan'l, you ain't never gonna run away agin," he said softly, fiercely. "You understand that? You're gonna fergit ever'thing I ever told you about the Crows, and Absaroka, and all the rest."

"Forget it? Why?"

" 'Cause it's got nothin' to do with you. This here's yer home, this valley. They's big things happenin' here. Powerful big things, Dan'l! You gotta be in on 'em!"

"Jim, what d'ya mean?"

"I mean you mustn't ever want to be a Injun any more! By gor, it ruint me but it ain't gonna git to you. It's folks like you gonna make the country over, you know that? I seen it happen t'other day right afore my eyes. Up on the mountain—"

He told the boy about Laurel Hill, about the wagons plunging down. He had forgotten Jonnie and the others now, he thought only of the thing he'd glimpsed and the terrible im-

portance of making Dan'l see it. The boy's eyes darkened with interest as he listened, but they were bewildered, too.

"Well, shucks, just gettin' some old wagons down a hill—that ain't so much. It ain't half as much as what you done t'other night! Sneakin' me away from them Umpquas and up the bank—"

"Oh, thunder, it ain't the same at all!"

"Why ain't it? You're as brave as them. Lots braver."

Jim gave him a frantic little shake. "Now listen. You gotta listen to me. You gotta change all them idees! Them wagons'll be all over the plains afore we know it. Lookit the folks in this valley a'ready! Why, they'll be plowin' fields in Absaroka! They'll be buildin' schools, and towns—"

"I don't care about all that!" cried Dan'l. "I only want to be like you!" The wide eyes swept over Jim's braids and feather. "*You* didn't change! You're just the same. And I'm gonna be just like you!"

Jim's hands slid from the boy's shoulders as he slowly straightened, looking down into a small, inflexible face whose expression of stubbornness he remembered too well from that snowy evening high above the gorge.

Jim turned slowly to Jonnie. So that's what you meant, he thought. He won't believe me less'n I prove it. I got 'im into this and now I gotta git 'im out. I can't run away and leave him to fight it by hisself—the rough way, the way I done. I gotta stay—and show 'im.

He looked again at Dan'l. "All right!" he said. "Then go ahead and *be* like me. Here's how I'm gonna be."

With a swift motion he had his knife out, then he seized a braid. One ruthless slash and it dropped, slithering and glossy, at his feet; an instant later the other followed. He snatched the coup feather out of his hair and flung it down beside the braids. Then he stood there, breathing hard and shaking, everything in him in an uproar at what he had done.

"Take a thunderin' good look," he said. "That's the last you'll see of a Crow around this here claim. Now go on in the cabin and git some sleep. I've had my say."

Slowly Dan'l obeyed, moving away toward the cabin like one in a dream. For the first time Jim became aware of the others. He didn't meet their gaze—not even Jonnie's. Reaction had set in now; he couldn't stand to look at what lay at his feet. He had done the right thing for Dan'l. But what of himself? Of his helpers? Suddenly Sally darted forward and scooped braids and feather into her arms, then whirled toward the cabin.

"Hold on!" Jim grated. "Whar—whar you takin' them things?"

Slowly she turned back. "I'm gonna put 'em where they belong," she told him softly. "The braids in the leather box, so's we'll always remember 'em. And the feather under the clock with Pa's medal."

The understanding in her voice, the strange weightless feeling of his slashed-off hair—it was too much for him to handle. He turned blindly and headed for the woods. It was all right, he need not leave the valley now, he could stay with his own people. And still—

He knew only that he must be alone awhile, to straighten the whole thing out and get hold of himself.

Jonnie, searching cautiously through the willows upstream ten minutes later, spotted him sitting on a flat stone by the water's edge, his head in his hands. Jonnie hesitated, touched by the weariness in the pose, and by the shorn black locks, which parted themselves sleekly down the back of Jim's head as if the braids were still there. What had they meant to him, Jonnie wondered. Something far deeper than anyone had guessed until the moment he had slashed them from his

head. That was a moment Jonnie knew he would not forget —nor would any of them who had seen it.

Jim had heard him, and turned.

"Want me to leave you be?" said Jonathan.

"It don't matter. Come on."

Jonnie went on, but stopped abruptly as he reached Jim's side. Jim was holding that little heathen buckskin sack. "Want to talk about it?" Jonnie asked.

Jim shrugged. "I'm just—tryin' to figger out whar this comes in. It's the only thing left," he said desperately. "But it's the biggest thing of all—"

Jonnie sat down very quietly beside him. "Jim, what is that?"

Jim hesitated, as if crossing some final inward barrier. But at last he spoke. "It's my medicine, Jonnie. It's the only luck I got. And it's powerful strong. It's saved my hide a hun'erd times—it even brought me here! But it's Crow medicine. It won't know me or help me now. By gor, I dunno what to do without it."

Jonnie sat rigid. Oh, lord a'mighty, he thought, we've changed him all we could, but inside he's just the same. He's still a Injun.

"It—brought you here?" he repeated cautiously.

"The song did—the medicine song. It was in my dream."

Then the whole thing came out, piece by piece, and haltingly. It was hard for Jim to tell this, Jonnie could see that. It was deep and private, locked away securely in Jim's Indian heart and only brought out now because the very foundations of his life were being shaken. Jonnie tried to be worthy of the trust, not letting his feelings show, keeping his pity and scorn and helpless anger all to himself.

But as the tale went on, as Jim quit explaining what medicine dreams were and began to describe his own, Jonathan's anger faded, and astonishment filled his mind instead. "You

spoke English to that grizzly?" he broke in softly. "When you was a Crow three year a'ready you dreamed in white man's talk?"

Jim nodded, his hands tight on the bundle. "I dunno whar I knew them words, Jonnie, seems like it was mighty long ago. 'The Lord is my shepherd—he makes me lie down in green pastures—he leads me beside still waters—though I walk through the—"

Jonnie was on his feet, shouting with relief and joy. "Oh, crimeny, Jim—oh, lord a'mighty—*I* know where you knew 'em, I know all about it! And I thought you was really Injun, clean through—!"

Jim slowly rose to face him. "What are you talkin' about?"

"About them words, Jim! It's all so blasted simple now—" Jonathan broke off, fighting to calm himself. He pulled Jim down again upon the stone. "Now listen," he said quietly, trying to keep his voice from trembling. "I'm gonna say 'em to you—and say 'em right. 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.'"

The words hung in the still air, vibrant with beauty and courage.

"That's your medicine, Jim," Jonnie said softly. "The Bible. The twenty-third psalm. Mother allus read it to us when we was sick, remember? That's why you thought of it in that dream—you was sick then! Feverish from starvin' and cuttin'

yourself with that knife! That's all a medicine dream is, from where I sit, Jim—a nightmare. You had yours about that grizzly—and it ain't no wonder! But what they was Injun about it you could put in your eye. You been a white man all along, clean through."

Still Jim sat silent, though understanding now lay clear and steady in his eyes. Then deliberately he ripped open the buckskin bundle in his hands, and with a gesture of revulsion flung the whole thing on the ground.

The late afternoon sun was slanting through the shallows before Jim straightened his cramped legs and stood up, aware once more of his surroundings and that it was time to go home. He was ready now. The afternoon had been like a miracle, illuminating the last dark corners of his mind. He had never felt so free, so completely without fear.

The future rose glowing before him—he would teach Dan'l how to shoot and ride. He would plow and reap and work with Jonnie, ride the length and breadth of the valley "hunting wolves" whenever Joe Meek called—and he hoped it was often. He grew warm with pride when he thought of the shining brass badge, the valley looking to him for law and protection. Nothing could touch him now, the tangles were ended. He and Jonnie had talked over every plan and hope and optimistic dream, and he was supremely confident that they would all come true. Never again would Absaroka cross his mind. He'd forget it entirely.

He stared down at the scattered grizzly teeth, in spite of himself seeing the thin brown line of horses and Indians file over the hills, seeing the hidden streams and the birch thickets where the deer played, and the copper-brown faces of the brave young men he'd grown up worshiping as heroes. Then Jonnie's hand reached down, gathered the scattered teeth and the piece of buckskin, and tucked them in his pocket.

"I reckon," said Jonnie, "these oughta go in that leather box too—so's we'll always remember. Them Injuns wasn't so bad, Jim. Look what they done for you. Made you fast and strong and brave. Mighty brave. The medicine even brought you back home. We don't want to forget 'em."

"Jonnie, I never could anyhow."

"I know. I seen you tryin'. Don't try."

Jim nodded. Here was the closeness he and Jonnie had known so long ago—regained at last, and deeper than ever. Once again they "knew each other's heart." He smiled, realizing the phrase had come to his mind in Crow. No matter. It was good that way.

He drew a deep, contented breath and started cabinward, then turned back, brushing awkwardly at his hair. It felt so strange, chopped off like this, hanging over his cheeks. He frowned and studied Jonnie's, then moved past him to the riverbank. Kneeling, he scooped up water and wet the dangling locks, clawing it back over his ears with his fingers. When he arose with a somewhat sheepish grin and turned to be inspected, Jonnie's laugh was good to hear.

"By golly, if that don't make a difference! You know somethin'? We look alike again."

They pushed on through the willows, climbed the path to the clearing and walked slowly, happily, up the sloping grass. Yonder across the glades the sun was setting; the woods showed black against a brilliant sky. But more brilliant by far in Jim's eyes was the yellow oblong of the doorway just ahead of him. There were no ghosts remaining in that cabin now, no memories he could not face. All was settled and at peace. He swept one lingering glance over the woods, the whispering river—all the riches that were his. Then he followed his brother through that lighted door.

Jim Keath had come back home again, at last.