
Tommy

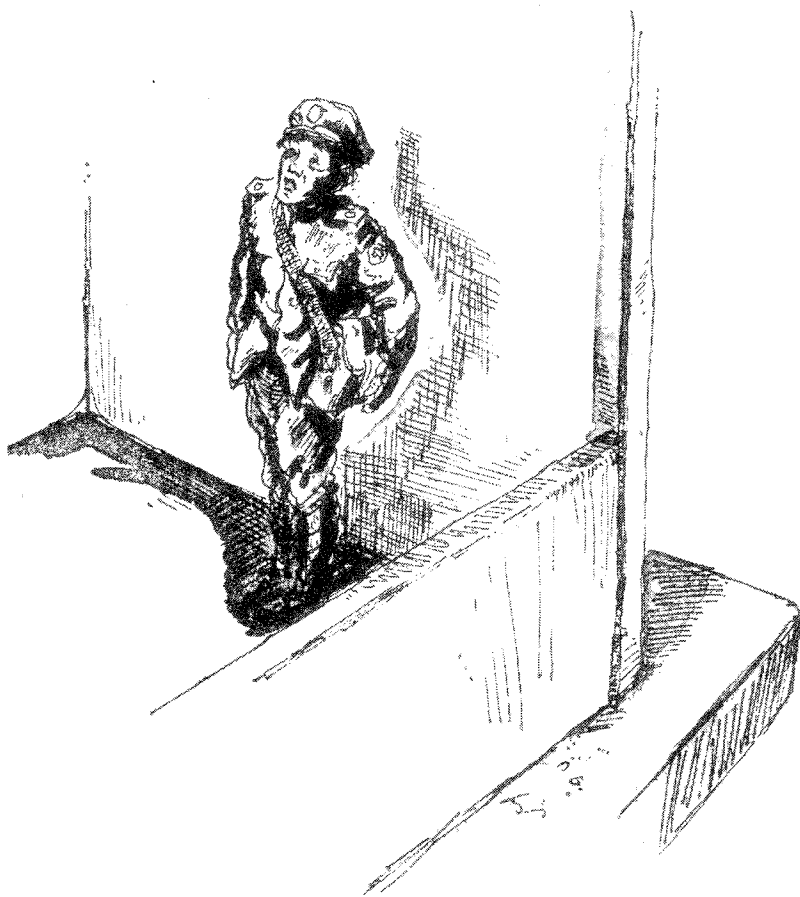


O MRI FELT HIMSELF GROW WEAK. What an idiot he'd been, not to have realized that the man and not just the medical bag would be changed! Or had he? After all, what did he need more just then than a bandage of the right size for the Indian? *Someone* of the right size to put it on! And, unless he was sadly mistaken, that was just what was waiting inside the magic cupboard.

He unlocked the door.

Yes, there he was—pink-cheeked, tousle-headed under his army cap, his uniform creased and mud-spattered and blood-stained, looking angry, frightened, and bewildered.

He rubbed his eyes with his free hand.



"Praise be for a bit of daylight, anyway," he said. "What the—"

Then he opened his eyes and saw Omri.

Omri actually saw him go white, and his knees gave way under him. He uttered a few sounds, half curses and half just noises. He dropped the bag and hid his face for a moment. Omri said hastily:

"Please don't be afraid. It's all right. I—" Then he had an absolute inspiration! "I'm a dream you're having. I won't hurt you, I just want you to do something for me, and then you'll wake up."

Slowly the little man lowered his hands and looked up again.

"A dream, is it? Well . . . I should've guessed. Yes, of course. It would be. The whole rotten war's nightmare enough, though, without giants and—and—" He stared around Omri's room. "Still and all, perhaps it's a change for the better. At least it's quiet here."

"Can you bring your bag and climb out? I need your help."

The soldier now managed a rather sickly smile and tipped his cap in a sort of salute. "Right you are! With you in a tick," he said, and picking up the bag, clambered over the edge of the cupboard.

"Stand on my hand," Omri commanded.

The soldier did not hesitate a moment, but swung

himself up by hooking his free arm around Omri's little finger. "Bit of a lark, this," he remarked. "I won't half enjoy telling the fellows about this dream of mine in the trenches tomorrow!"

Omri carried him to the spot where Little Bear sat holding his leg, which was still bleeding. The soldier stepped down and stood, knee deep in carpet pile, staring.

"Well I'll be jiggered!" he breathed. "A bloomin' Indian! This is a rum dream, and no mistake! And wounded, too. Well, I suppose that's my job, is it?—to patch him up?"

"Yes, please," said Omri.

Without more ado, the soldier put the bag on the floor and snapped open its all-but-invisible catches. Omri leaned over to see. Now he really did need a magnifying glass, and so badly did he want to see the details of that miniature doctor's bag that he risked sneaking into Gillon's room (Gillon always slept late, and anyway it wasn't seven o'clock yet) and pinching his from his secret drawer.

By the time he got back to his own room, the soldier was kneeling at Little Bear's feet, applying a neat tourniquet to the top of his leg. Omri peered through the magnifying glass into the open bag. It was amazing—everything was there, bottles, pill boxes, ointments, some steel instruments including a tiny hypodermic needle, and as many rolls of bandages as you could want.

Omri then ventured to look at the wound. Yes, it was

quite deep—the horse must have given him a terrific kick.

That reminded him—where was the horse? He looked around in a fright. But he soon saw it, trying forlornly to eat the carpet. “I must get it some grass,” thought Omri, meanwhile offering it a small piece of stale bread, which it ate gratefully, and then some water in a tin lid. It was odd how the horse was not frightened of him. Perhaps it couldn’t see him very well.

“There now, he’ll do,” said the soldier, getting up.

Omri looked at the Indian’s leg through his magnifying glass. The wound was bandaged beautifully. Even Little Bear was examining it with obvious approval.

“Thank you very much,” said Omri. “Would you like to wake up now?”

“Might as well, I suppose. Not that there’s much to look forward to except mud and rats and German shells coming over. . . . Still, got to win the war, haven’t we? Can’t desert, even into a dream, not for long, that is—duty calls and all that, eh?”

Omri gently picked him up and put him into the cupboard.

“Good-by,” he said. “Perhaps, sometime, you could dream me again.”

“A pleasure,” said the soldier cheerfully. “Tommy Atkins, at your service. Any night, except when there’s an attack on—none of us gets any sleep to speak of then.” And he

gave Omri a smart salute.

Regretfully Omri shut and locked the door. He was tempted to keep the soldier, but it was too complicated just now. Anyway, he could always bring him back to life again if he liked. . . . A moment or two later he opened the door again to check. There was the orderly, bag in hand, standing just as Omri had last seen him, at the salute. Only now he was plastic again.

Little Bear was calmly pulling on his blood-stained leggings.

"Good magic," he remarked. "Leg feel good."

"Little Bear, what will you do all day while I'm at school?"

"You bring bark of tree. Little Bear make longhouse."

"What's that?"

"Iroquois house. Need earth, stick posts in."

"*Earth? Posts?*"

"Earth. Posts. Bark. Not forget food. Weapons. Tools. Pots. Water. Fire—"

There were no quarrels at breakfast that morning. Omri gulped down his egg and ran. In the greenhouse he found a seed tray already full of soil, well pressed down. He carried that secretly upstairs and laid it on the floor behind the dressing-up crate, which he was pretty sure his mother wouldn't shift even if it was her cleaning day. Then he took his penknife and went out again.

Fortunately one of the trees in the garden had the sort of bark that came off easily—a silvery, flaky kind. He cut off a biggish strip, and then another to make sure. (How long was a longhouse?) He pulled some grass for the horse. He cut a bundle of thin, strong, straight twigs and stripped off their leaves. Then he went back to his room and laid all these offerings beside Little Bear, who was seated outside his tepee, apparently saying his prayers.

“Omri!” came his mother’s call from downstairs. “Time to go!”

Omri took out of his pocket the corner of toast he’d saved from breakfast and cleaned out the last of the corned beef from the tin. There was some corn left as well, though it was getting rather dry by now. He filled up Action Man’s beaker with water from the bathroom, pouring a little into the horse’s drinking lid. The horse was munching the fresh grass with every sign of enjoyment. Omri noticed its bridle had been replaced with a halter, cleverly made of a length of thread.

“Omri!”

“Just coming—”

“The others have gone! Hurry up, you’ll be late!”

One last thing! Little Bear couldn’t make a longhouse without some sort of tool beside his knife. He’d need an ax. Frantically Omri rummaged in the biscuit tin. Ah! A knight, wielding a fearsome-looking battle-ax! It wasn’t

right, but it was better than nothing and would have to do. In a second the knight was locked in the cupboard.

"Omri!"

"One second!"

"What are you *doing*?"

Crash! The ax was being used on the inside of the cupboard door!

Omri wrenched it open and snatched the ax from the startled hands of the knight, who had just time for one horrified look before he was reduced to plastic again by the slamming of the door. Never mind! He had looked most unpleasant, just as knights must have looked when they were murdering the poor Saracens in Palestine. Omri had very little time for knights.

The ax was a beauty, though! Shining steel, with a sharp edge on both sides of the head, and a long, heavy steel handle. Omri laid it at Little Bear's side.

"Little Bear—"

But he was still in a trance—communicating with his ancestors, Omri supposed. Well, Little Bear would find everything when he came to. There was quite a trail of spilt earth leading behind the crate. Omri flashed down the stairs, grabbed his parka and his lunch money, and was gone.

The Chief Is Dead, Long Live the Chief



HE GOT TO SCHOOL EARLY by running all the way. The first thing he did was to head for the school library shelves for a book on Indians. And to his joy, he soon found one, under the section labeled "Peoples of the World"—a book called *On the Trail of the Iroquois*.

He couldn't take it out because there was nobody there to write him down for it; but he sat down then and there on a bench and began to read it.

Now, Omri was not what you'd call a great reader. He couldn't get into books, somehow, unless he knew them already. And how, as his teacher never tired of asking, was he ever going to get to know any more books until he read them for the first time?

And this *On the Trail of the Iroquois* was not exactly a comic. Tiny print, hardly any pictures, and no fewer than three hundred pages. "Getting into" this was obviously out of the question, so Omri just dipped.

He managed to find out one or two fairly interesting things straight away. Iroquois Indians were sometimes called "The Five Nations." One of the five were the Mohawks, a tribe Omri had heard of. They had indeed lived in longhouses, not tepees, and their main foods had been maize and squash (whatever they were) and beans. These vegetables had, for some strange reason, been called "The Three Sisters."

There were many mentions of the Algonquins as the Iroquois' enemies, and Omri confirmed that the Iroquois had fought beside the English while the Algonquins fought for the French sometime in the 1700s, and that both sides had scalped like mad.

At this point he really began to get interested. The book, in its terribly grown-up way, was trying to tell him something about why the Indians had done such a lot of scalping. Omri had always thought it was just an Indian custom, but the book seemed to say that it wasn't at all, at least not till the white man came. The white man seemed to have made the Iroquois and the Algonquin keen on scalping each other, not to mention white men, French or English as the case might be, by offering them money and

whiskey and guns. . . . Omri was deep in the book, frowning heavily, several minutes after the bell had rung. Someone had to tap him on the shoulder and tell him to hurry in to Assembly.

The morning lasted forever. Three times his teacher had cause to tell Omri to wake up. At last Patrick leaned over and whispered, "You're even dreamier than usual today. What's up?"

"I'm thinking about your Indian."

"Listen," hissed Patrick. "I think you're putting me on about that Indian. It was nothing so marvelous. You can buy them for a few pence in Yapp's." (Yapp's was their local news agent and toyshop.)

"I know, and all the equipment for them! I'm going shopping at lunchbreak. Are you coming?"

"We're not allowed out of school at lunch unless we eat at home, you know that!"

"I'm going anyway. I've got to."

"Go after school."

"No, I've got to go home after school."

"What? Aren't you staying to skateboard?"

"*Omri and Patrick!* Will you kindly stop chattering?"

They stopped.

At long last lunchtime came.

"I'm going. Are you coming?"

"No. There'll only be trouble."

"I can't help that."

"You're a twit."

Twit or not, Omri sneaked out, ran across the playground, through a hole in the fence (the front gate was kept locked to keep the infants from going in the road), and in five minutes, by running all the way, he had reached Yapp's.

The selection of plastic figures there was good. There was one whole box of mixed cowboys and Indians. Omri searched till he found a chief wearing a cloak and a full feather headdress, with a bow in his hand and a quiverful of arrows slung across his back. Omri bought it with part of his lunch money and rushed back to school before he could be missed.

He showed the chief to Patrick.

"Why get another Indian?"

"Only for the bow and arrows."

Patrick was now looking at him as if he'd gone completely screwy.

In the afternoon, mercifully, they had two periods of handicrafts.

Omri had completely forgotten to bring the tepee he'd made, but there were plenty of scraps of felt, sticks, needles, and thread lying about the handicrafts room and he'd soon made another one, much better than the first. Sewing had always bored him rigid, but now he sat for half an hour

stitching away without even looking up. He was trying to achieve the patched look of a real tepee made of odd-shaped pieces of hide, and he also found a way of bracing the sticks so that they didn't fold up every time they were nudged.

"Very good, Omri!" remarked his teacher several times. "What patience all of a sudden!" Omri, who usually liked praise as much as anyone, hardly heard her, he was concentrating so hard.

After a long time he became aware that Patrick was standing over him, breathing through his nose rather noisily to attract his attention.

"Is that for my Indian?"

"My Indian. Yes."

"Why are you doing it in bits like that?"

"To be like a real one."

"Real ones have designs on."

"So will this. He's going to paint proper Iroquois ones."

"Who is?"

"Little Bear. That's his name."

"Why not call him Running Nose?" asked Patrick with a grin.

Omri looked up at him blankly. "Because his name's Little Bear," he said. Patrick stopped grinning. He frowned.

"I wish you'd stop this stupid business," he said peevishly, "going on as if it weren't a joke."

Omri went on looking at him for a moment and then went back to his bracing. Each pair of sticks had to have another, short stick glued between them. It was quite tricky. Patrick stood a minute and then said, "Can I come home with you *today*?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Why not?"

"Mum's having guests," Omri mumbled. He didn't tell lies very well, and Patrick knew at once it was a lie and was hurt.

"Oh all right then, be like that," he said, and stalked off furiously.

The afternoon ended at last. Omri accomplished the walk home, which with normal dawdling took half an hour, in a little over ten minutes. He arrived sorely out of breath and greeted his surprised mother ("Have you developed a jet engine, or have you been expelled?") with a lot of gasping and a request to go straight to his room without waiting for tea.

"What have you been up to, up there? There's an awful mess on the floor—looks like bits of grass and bark. And where *did* you get that beautiful little Indian tepee? I think it's made of real leather."

Omri looked at her, speechless. "I—" he began at last. Telling lies to Patrick was one thing. Lying to his mother was quite something else and he never did it unless the

emergency was dire. But mercifully the phone rang just then, so he was spared—for the moment. He dashed upstairs.

There was indeed a fair old mess, though no worse than he often left himself when he'd been working on something. Little Bear and the horse were nowhere to be seen, but Omri guessed where to look—behind the dressing-up crate.

A wonderful sight met his eyes. A longhouse—not finished, but no less interesting and beautiful for that—stood on the seed box, whose smooth surface was now much trampled over. There were hoof—as well as moccasin—prints. Omri saw that a ramp, made of part of the bark, had been laid against the side of the wooden box, up which the horse had been led—to Omri's delight (odd as it may seem), a tiny pile of horse manure lay on the ramp as proof of the horse's passing. And there he was, tied by a thread to an upright twig hammered (presumably) into the ground, munching a small pile of grass that the Indian had carried up for him.

Little Bear himself was still working, so intently that he didn't even notice that he was not alone. Omri watched him in utter fascination. The longhouse was about half finished. The twigs, which had been taken from the birch tree on the lawn, had been stripped of their bark, leaving them shining white. Each one had then been bent into an arch, the ends thrust into the earth, and crosspieces lashed to the



sides with thread. More and more twigs (which were stout poles to the Indian) had been added, with never a nail or a screw needed, to strengthen the structure, and now Little Bear had begun to fix flakes of bark, like tiny tiles, onto the crosspieces.

He was seated on the roof itself, his feet locked around the main roofpole, which ran the length of the house, hanging these bark tiles, each of which he would first carefully shape with his knife. The knight's battle-ax lay on the ground beside an unused pile of twigs. It had clearly been used to chop and strip them and had been made to serve Little Bear's purpose very well.

At last Omri saw him straighten up, stretch his arms toward the ceiling, and open his mouth in a tremendous noisy yawn.

"Tired?" he asked him.

Little Bear got such a fright he almost fell off the long-house roof, and the horse neighed and tugged at his rope. But then Little Bear looked up and saw Omri hanging over the crate far above him, and grinned.

"Little Bear tired. Work many hour. Look! Make long-house. Work for many braves—I make alone. Also not got good tools. Ax Omri give heavy. Why no tomahawk?"

Omri was getting used to his Indian's ungrateful ways and was not offended. He showed him the tepee he'd made. "I suppose you won't want this, now you've got

your longhouse," he said rather sadly.

"Want! Want!" He seemed to have decided tepees had their uses, after all. He circled it. "Good! Give paints. Make pictures."

Omri unearthed his poster paints. When he came back with them, he found Little Bear sitting cross-legged on the earth, facing the figure of the chief that Omri had put next to the tepee. Little Bear was clearly puzzled.

"It's plastic," said Omri. "I bought it in a shop."

"Plass-tick?" Little Bear stared at the figure with its big feather headdress. "You make magic, get bow and arrows from plass-tick?"

"Yes."

"Also make feathers real?" he asked, with a gleam in his eye.

"You like that headdress?"

"Little Bear like. But that for chief. Little Bear not chief till father die."

"But you could just try it on?"

Little Bear looked doubtful but he nodded.

"Make real. Then see."

Omri shut the Indian chief into the cupboard. Before he turned the key, he leaned down to where Little Bear was examining the (to him) enormous pots of paint.

"Little Bear, are you lonely?"

"Huh?"

"Would you like a—a friend?"

"Got friend," said the Indian, jerking his head toward the horse.

"I meant another Indian."

Little Bear looked up swiftly, his hands still. There was a long silence.

"Wife?" he asked at last.

"No, it's a man," said Omri. "The—the chief."

"Not want," said Little Bear immediately, and went back to his work with a bent head.

Omri was disappointed. He had thought it might be fun to have two Indians. But somehow he couldn't do anything Little Bear didn't want. He would have to treat this chief as he had treated the knight—grab the weapons and turn him back into plastic again at once.

Only this time it wasn't quite so easy.

When he opened the cupboard, the chief was still sitting on the shelf, looking about him in bewilderment, blinking as the light struck his eyes. Omri saw at once that he was a very old man, covered in wrinkles. He took the bow out of his hands quite easily. But the quiverful of arrows was hung around him on a leather thong, and as for actually lifting the feathered headdress clean off his gray old head, Omri found he just couldn't bring himself to do it. It seemed so rude.

The old man gazed up at him, blankly at first, and then

with dawning terror. But he didn't get up and he didn't speak, though Omri saw his lips moving and noticed he had hardly any teeth.

Omri somehow felt he should offer the old chief some friendly word to reassure him. So he held up one hand, as white men sometimes did in films when they were treating Indian chiefs with politeness, and said, "How."

The old Indian lifted a trembling hand, and then suddenly he slumped onto his side.

"Little Bear! Little Bear! Quick, get onto my hand!"

Omri reached down and Little Bear climbed onto his hand from the longhouse roof.

"What?"

"The old Indian—I think he's fainted!"

He carried Little Bear to the cupboard and Little Bear stepped off onto the shelf. He stooped beside the crumpled figure. Taking the single feather out of the back of his own headband, he held it in front of the old man's mouth. Then he shook his head.

"Dead," he said. "No breath. Heart stop. Old man. Gone to ancestors, very happy." Without more ado, he began to strip the body, taking the headdress, the arrows, and the big, richly decorated cloak for good measure.

Omri was shocked.

"Little Bear, stop. Surely you shouldn't—"

"Chief dead. I only other Indian here. No one else to be

chief. Little Bear chief now," he said, whirling the cloak about his own bare shoulders and clapping the splendid circle of feathers onto his head with a flourish. He picked up the quiver.

"Omri give bow!" he commanded. And it was a command. Omri obeyed it without thinking. "Now! You make magic. Deer for Little Bear hunt. Fire for cook. Good meat!" He folded his arms, scowling up at Omri.

Omri was quite taken aback by all this. While giving Little Bear every respect as a person, he was not about to be turned into his slave. He began to wonder if giving him those weapons, let alone letting him make himself into a chief, was such a good idea.

"Now look here, Little Bear—" he began, in a teacherish tone.

"OMRI!"

It was his father's voice, fairly roaring at him from the foot of the stairs. Omri jumped, bumping the cupboard. Little Bear fell over backward, considerably spoiling his dignity.

"Yes?"

"COME DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!"

Omri had no time for courtesies. He snatched Little Bear up, set him down near his half-finished longhouse, shut and locked the cupboard, and ran downstairs.

His father was waiting for him.

"Omri, have you been in the greenhouse lately?"

"Er—"

"And did you, while you were there, remove a seed tray planted out with marrow seeds, *may I ask?*"

"Well, I—"

"Yes or no."

"Well, yes, but—"

"And is it possible that in addition you have been hacking at the trunk of the birch and torn off strips of bark?"

"But Dad, it was only—"

"Don't you know trees can *die* if you strip too much of their bark off? It's like their skin! As for the seed tray, that is *mine*. You've no business taking things from the greenhouse and you know it. Now I want it back, and you'd better not have disturbed the seeds or heaven help you!"

Omri swallowed hard. He and his father stared at each other.

"I can't give it back," he said at last. "But I'll buy you another tray and some more seeds. I've got enough money. *Please.*"

Omri's father had a quick temper, especially about anything concerning the garden, but he was not unreasonable, and above all he was not the sort to pry into his children's secrets. He realized at once that his seed tray, as a seed tray, was lost to him forever and that it was no use hectoring Omri about it.

"All right," he said. "You can go to the hardware shop and buy them, but I want them today."

Omri's face fell.

"Today? But it's nearly five o'clock now."

"Precisely. Be off."

Uninvited Brothers



OMRI WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO ride his bicycle in the road, but then he wasn't supposed to ride it on the pavement either, not fast at any rate, so he compromised. He rode it slowly on the pavement as far as the corner, then bumped down off the curb and went like the wind.

The hardware shop was still open. He bought the seed tray and the seeds and was just paying for them when he noticed something. On the seed packet, under the word "Marrow," was written another word in brackets: "Squash."

So one of the "three sisters" was marrow! On impulse he asked the shopkeeper, "Do you know what maize is?"

"Maize, son? That's sweet corn, isn't it?"

"Have you some seeds of that?"

Outside, standing by Omri's bike, was Patrick.

"Hi."

"Hi. I saw you going in. What did you get?"

Omri showed him.

"More presents for the Indian?" Patrick asked sarcastically.

"Well, sort of. If—"

"If what?"

"If I can keep him long enough. Till they grow."

Patrick stared at him and Omri stared back.

"I've been to Yapp's," said Patrick. "I bought you something."

"Yeah? What?" asked Omri, hopefully.

Slowly Patrick took his hand out of his pocket, held it in front of him, and opened the fingers. In his palm lay a cowboy on a horse, with a pistol in one hand pointing upward, or what would have been upward if it hadn't been lying on its side.

Omri looked at it silently. Then he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I don't want it."

"Why not? Now you can play a proper game with the Indian."

"They'd fight."

"Isn't that the whole idea?"

"They might hurt each other."

There was a pause, and then Patrick leaned forward

and asked, very slowly and loudly, *"How can they hurt each other? They are made of plastic!"*

"Listen," said Omri, and then stopped, and then started again. "The Indian isn't plastic. He's real."

Patrick heaved a deep, deep sigh and put the cowboy back in his pocket. He'd been friends with Omri for years, ever since they'd started school. They knew each other very well. Just as Patrick knew when Omri was lying, he also knew when he wasn't. The only trouble was that this was a non-lie he couldn't believe.

"I want to see him," he said.

Omri debated with himself. He somehow felt that if he didn't share his secret with Patrick, their friendship would be over. He didn't want that. And besides, the thrill of showing his Indian to someone else was something he could not do without for much longer.

"Okay. Come on."

Going home they broke the law even more, riding on the road *and* with Patrick on the crossbar. They went around the back way by the alley in case anyone happened to be looking out of a window.

Omri said, "He wants a fire. I suppose we can't make one indoors."

"You could, on a tin plate, like for indoor fireworks," said Patrick.

Omri looked at him.

"Let's collect some twigs."

Patrick picked up a twig about a foot long. Omri laughed.

"That's no good! They've got to be tiny twigs. Like this." And he picked some slivers off the privet hedge.

"Does he want the fire to cook on?" asked Patrick slowly.

"Yes."

"Then that's no use. A fire made of those would burn out in a couple of seconds."

Omri hadn't thought of that.

"What you need," said Patrick, "is a little ball of tar. That burns for ages. And you could put the twigs on top to look like a real campfire."

"That's a brilliant idea!"

"I know where they've been tarring a road, too," said Patrick.

"Come on, let's go."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe in him yet. I want to see."

"All right. But first I have to give this stuff to my dad."

There was a further delay when his father at first insisted on Omri filling the seed tray with compost and planting the seeds in it then and there. But when Omri gave him the corn seed as a present he said, "Well! Thanks. Oh all right, I can see you're bursting to get away. You can do

the planting tomorrow before school.”

Omri and Patrick rushed upstairs. At the top Omri stopped cold. His bedroom door, which he always shut automatically, was wide open. And just inside, crouching side by side with their backs to him, were his brothers.

They were so absolutely still that Omri knew they were watching something. He couldn't bear it. They had come into his room without his permission, and they had seen his Indian. Now they would tell everybody! His secret, his precious secret, his alone to keep or share, was a secret no more. Something broke inside him and he heard himself scream: “Get out of my room! Get out of my room!”

Both boys spun around.

“Shut up, you'll frighten him,” said Adiel at once. “Gillon came in to look for his rat and he found it, and then he saw this absolutely fabulous little house you've made and he called me in to look at it.”

Omri looked at the floor. The seed tray with the long-house, now nearly finished, had been moved into the center of the room. It was *that* they had been looking at. A quick glance all around showed no sign of Indian or horse, but Gillon's tame white rat was on his shoulder.

“I can't get over it,” Adiel went on. “How on earth did you do it, without using any glue or anything? It's all done with tiny little threads, and pegs, and—look, Gillon! It's all made of real twigs and bark. It's absolutely *terrific*,” he said



with such awe-struck admiration in his voice that Omri felt ashamed.

"I didn't—" he began. But Patrick, who had been gaping at the longhouse in amazement, gave him a heavy nudge that nearly knocked him over.

"Yes," said Omri. "Well. Would you mind leaving now? And take the rat. You're not to let him in here! This is my room, you know."

"And this is my magnifying glass, you know," echoed Gillon, but he was obviously too overcome with admiration to be angry with Omri for pinching it. He was using it now to examine the fine details of the building. "I knew you were good at making things," he said, "but this is uncanny. You must have fingers like a fairy to tie those *witchy* little knots. What's that?" he asked suddenly.

They'd all heard it—a high, faint whinny coming from under the bed.

Omri was galvanized into action. At all costs he must prevent their finding out now! He flung himself on his knees and pretended to grope under the bed. "It's nothing, only that little clockwork dolphin I got in my Christmas stocking," he burred. "I must have wound it up and it suddenly started clicking, you know how they do, it's quite creepy sometimes when they suddenly start—clicking—"

By this time he'd leaped up again and was almost pushing the two older boys out of the room.

"Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of us?" asked Gillon suspiciously.

"Just go, you know you have to get out of my room when I ask you—" He could hear the little horse whinnying again and it didn't sound a bit like the dolphin.

"That sounds just like a pony," said Adiel.

"Oh *beard* it's a pony, a tiny witchy pony under my bed!" said Omri mockingly. At last they went, not without glancing back suspiciously several times, and Omri slammed the door, bolted it, and leaned against it with closed eyes.

"Is it a pony?" whispered Patrick, agog.

Omri nodded. Then he opened his eyes, lay down again, and peered under the bed.

"Give me that flashlight from the chest of drawers."

Patrick gave it to him and lay beside him. They peered together as the beam probed the darkness.

"Crumbs!" breathed Patrick reverently. "It's true!"

The horse was standing, seemingly alone, whinnying. When the light hit him he stopped and turned his head. Omri could see a pair of leggings behind him.

"It's all right, Little Bear, it's me!" said Omri.

Slowly a crest of feathers, then a pair of eyes appeared over the top of the horse's back.

"Who others?" he asked.

"My brothers. It's okay, they didn't see you."

"Little Bear hear coming. Take horse, run, hide."

"Good. Come on out and meet my friend Patrick."

Little Bear jumped astride the horse and rode proudly out, wearing his new cloak and headdress. He gazed up imperiously at Patrick, who gazed back in wonder.

Then he nodded to Patrick who tried several times to say something, but his voice just came out as a squeak.

"Omri's friend, Little Bear's friend," said Little Bear magnanimously.

Patrick swallowed. His eyes seemed in danger of popping right out of his head.

Little Bear waited politely, but when Patrick didn't speak he rode over to the seed tray. The brothers had brought it out from behind the crate; they'd been careful, but the ramp had got moved. Omri hurried to put it back, and Little Bear rode the horse up it, dismounted, and tied it by its halter to the post he had driven into the compost. Then he went calmly on with his work on his longhouse.

Patrick licked his lips, swallowed twice more, and croaked out, "He's real. He's a real live Indian."

"I told you."

"How did it happen?"

"Don't ask me. Something to do with this cupboard, or maybe it's the key—it's very old. You lock plastic people inside, and they come alive."

Patrick goggled at him. "You mean—it's not only him?"

You can do it with any toy?"

"Only plastic ones."

An incredulous grin spread over Patrick's face.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's bring loads of things to life! Whole armies—"

And he sprang toward the biscuit tins. Omri grabbed him.

"No, wait! It's not so simple."

Patrick, his hands already full of soldiers, was making for the cupboard. "Why not?"

"Because they'd all—don't you see—they'd be *real*."

"Real? What do you mean?"

"Little Bear isn't a toy. He's a real man. He really lived. Maybe he's still—I don't know—he's in the middle of his life—somewhere in America in seventeen-something-or-other. He's from the *past*," Omri struggled to explain as Patrick looked blank.

"I don't get it."

"Listen. Little Bear has told me about his life. He's fought in wars, and scalped people, and grown stuff to eat like marrows and stuff, and had a wife. She died. He doesn't know how he got here but he thinks it's magic and he accepts magic, he believes in it, he thinks I'm some kind of spirit or something. What I mean," Omri persisted, as Patrick's eyes strayed longingly to the cupboard, "is that if you put all those men in there, when they came to life they'd be real men with real lives of their own, from their

own times and countries, talking their own languages. You couldn't just—set them up and make them do what you wanted them to. They'd do what *they* wanted to, or they might get terrified and run away or—well, one I tried it with, an old Indian, actually died of—of fright when he saw me. Look, if you don't believe me!" And Omri opened the cupboard.

There lay the body of the old chief, now made of plastic, but still unmistakably dead, and not dead the way some plastic soldiers are made to look dead but the way real people look—crumpled up, empty.

Patrick picked it up, turning it in his hand. He'd put the soldiers down by now.

"This isn't the one you bought at lunchtime?"

"Yes."

"Crumbs."

"You see?"

"Where's his headdress?"

"Little Bear took it. He says he's a chief now. It's made him even more bossy and—and *difficult* than before," said Omri, using a word his mother often used when he was insisting on having his own way.

Patrick put the dead Indian down hurriedly and wiped his hand on the seat of his jeans.

"Maybe this isn't such fun as I thought."

Omri considered for a moment.

"No," he agreed soberly, "it's not *fun*."

They stared at Little Bear. He had finished the shell of the longhouse now. Taking off his headdress he tucked it under his arm, stooped, and entered through the low doorway at one end. After a moment he came out and looked up at Omri.

"Little Bear hungry," he said. "You get deer? Bear? Moose?"

"No."

He scowled. "I say get. Why you not get?"

"The shops are shut. Besides," added Omri, thinking he sounded rather feeble, especially in front of Patrick, "I'm not sure I like the idea of having bears shambling about my room, *or* of having them killed. I'll give you meat and a fire and you can cook it and that'll have to do."

Little Bear looked baffled for a moment. Then he swiftly put on the headdress, and drew himself to his full height of almost three inches (three and a quarter with the feathers). He folded his arms and glared at Omri.

"Little Bear chief now. Chief hunts. Kills own meat. Not take meat others kill. If not hunt, lose skill with bow. For today, you give meat. Tomorrow, go shop, get bear, plasstick. Make real. I hunt. Not here," he added, looking up scornfully at the distant ceiling. "Out. Under sky. Now fire."

Patrick, who had been crouching, stood up. He, too,

seemed to be under Little Bear's spell.

"I'll run and get the tar," he said.

"No, wait a minute," said Omri. "I've got another idea."

He ran downstairs. Fortunately the living room was empty. In the coal scuttle beside the open fireplace was a packet of firelighters. He broke a fairly large bit off one and wrapped it in a scrap of newspaper. Then he went to the kitchen. His mother was standing at the sink peeling apples.

Omri hesitated, then went to the refrigerator.

"Don't eat now, Omri, it's nearly suppertime."

"Just a tiny bit," he said.

There was a lovely chunk of raw meat on a plate. Omri sniffed his fingers, wiped them hard on his sweater to get the stink of the firelighter off them, then took a big carving knife from the drawer, and, with an anxious glance at his mother's back, began sawing a corner off the meat.

Luckily it was steak and cut easily. Even so he nearly had the whole plate off the shelf and onto the floor before he'd got his corner off.

His mother swung around just as he closed the refrigerator door.

"A tiny bit of what?" she asked. She often reacted late to things he said.

"Nothing," he said, hiding the raw bit of meat in his hand. "Mum, could I borrow a tin plate?"

"I haven't got such a thing."

"Yes you have, the one you bought Adiel to go camping."

"That's in Adiel's room somewhere, I haven't got it. A tiny bit of *what?*"

But Omri was already on his way upstairs. Adiel was in his room (he would be!) doing his homework.

"What do *you* want?" he asked the second Omri crept in.

"That plate—you know—your camping one."

"Oh that!" said Adiel, going back to his French.

"Well, can I have it?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. It's over there somewhere."

Omri found it eventually in an old knapsack, covered with disgusting bits of baked beans, dry and hard as cement. He hurried across to his own room. Whenever he'd been away from it for even a few minutes, he felt his heart beating in panic as he opened the door for fear of what he might find (or not find). The burden of constant worry was beginning to wear him out.

But all was as he had left it this time. Patrick was crouching near the seed tray. Little Bear was directing him to take the tops off several of the jars of poster paint while he himself fashioned something almost too small to see.

"It's a paintbrush," whispered Patrick. "He cut a bit off his own hair and he's tying it to a tiny scrap of wood he

found, about the size of a big splinter.”

“Pour a bit of paint into the lids so he can reach to dip,” said Omri.

Meanwhile he was scraping the dry beans off the plate with his nails. He took the fragment of firelighter and the twigs out of his pocket and arranged them in the center of the plate. He washed the bit of meat in his bedside water glass. He’d had a wonderful idea for a spit to cook it on. From a flat box in which his first Erector set had once been neatly laid out, but which was now in chaos, he took a rod, ready bent into a handle shape, and pushed this through the meat. Then, from small bits of the set, he quickly made a sort of stand for it to rest on, with legs each side of the fire so that the meat hung over the middle of it.

“Let’s light it now!” said Patrick, who was getting very excited again.

“Little Bear—come and see your fire,” said Omri.

Little Bear looked up from his paints and then ran down the ramp, across the carpet, and vaulted onto the edge of the plate. Omri struck a match and lit the firelighter, which flared up at once with a bluish flame, engulfing the twigs and the meat at once. The twigs gave off a gratifying crackle while they lasted, but the firelighter gave off a very ungratifying stench, which made Little Bear wrinkle up his nose.

"Stink," he cried. "Spoil meat!"

"No it won't!" Omri said. "Turn the handle of the spit, Little Bear."

Evidently he wasn't much used to spits, but he soon got the hang of it. The chunk of steak turned and turned in the flame, and soon lost its raw red look and began to go gray and then brown. The good juicy smell of roasting beef began to compete with the spirituous reek of the firelighter.

"Mmm!" said Little Bear appreciatively, turning till the sweat ran off his face. "Meat!" He had thrown off his chief's cloak and his chest shone red. Patrick couldn't take his eyes off him.

"Please, Omri," he whispered, "couldn't I have one? Couldn't I choose just one—a soldier, or anything I liked—and make him come to life in your cupboard?"

Cowboy!



OMRI GAPPED AT HIM. He hadn't thought of this, but of course now that he did it was obvious—no boy who knew the secret could possibly rest until he had a little live person of his own.

“Patrick—it's not like you think—just something to play with—”

“Of course not, you've explained all about it, now just let me put—”

“But you have to think about it first. No, no, stop, you can't yet! And anyway I don't agree to you using one of mine!” Omri didn't know why he was so reluctant. It wasn't that he was mean. He just knew, somehow, that something awful would happen if he let Patrick have his own way. But

it wasn't easy to stop him. Omri had grabbed him, but he wrenched free.

"I've got to—" he panted. "I've got to—!"

He stretched out his hand toward the pile of soldiers again. They struggled. Patrick seemed to have gone a bit crazy. Suddenly Omri felt the rim of the tin plate under his shifting feet.

He shoved Patrick out of the way and they both stared downward. The plate had tipped, the fire slipped off onto the carpet. Little Bear, with a yell, had leaped clear, and was now waving his arms and shouting horrible things at them. His roast meat had disappeared under Omri's foot, which instinctively stamped down on the fire to put it out. He felt a squishy feeling under his shoe.

"Now look! We've spoiled the meat!" he shouted at Patrick. "If all you can do is fight, I wish I'd never brought you!"

Patrick looked mulish. "It was your fault. You should have let me put something in the cupboard."

Omri lifted his shoe. Underneath was a nasty mess of burned stuff, squashed meat, and bent Erector set. Little Bear let out a wail.

"You no Great Spirit! Only stupid boy! Fight, spoil good meal! You feel shame!"

"Maybe we can rescue it—"

He crouched down and disentangled the meat from the

mess, burning his fingers. He tried to brush it clean but it was no use—it was all mixed up with the smelly stuff of the firelighter, and stuck with bits of carpet hairs.

"I'm terribly sorry, Little Bear," he mumbled.

"No good sorry! Little Bear hungry, work all day, cook meat—now what eat? I chop you down like tree!" And to Omri's horror he saw Little Bear run to where the battle-ax was lying, pick it up, and advance toward his leg, swinging it in great circles as he came.

Patrick fairly danced with excitement. "Isn't he fantastically brave, though! Much more than David with Goliath!"

Omri felt the whole thing was going too far. He removed his leg from harm's way. "Little Bear! Calm down," he said. "I've said I'm sorry."

Little Bear looked at him, blazing-eyed. Then he rushed over to the chair Omri used at his table and began chopping wedges out of the leg of it.

"Stop! Stop! Or I'll put you back in the cupboard!"

Little Bear stopped abruptly and dropped the ax. He stood with his back to them, his shoulders heaving.

"I'll get you something to eat—right now—something delicious. Go and paint. It'll make you feel better. I won't be long." To Patrick he said, "Hang on. I can smell supper cooking, I'll go and get a bit of whatever we're having," and he rushed downstairs without stopping to think.

His mother was dishing up a nice hot stew.

"Can I have a tiny bit of that, Mum? Just a little bit, in a spoon. It's for a game we're playing."

His mother obligingly gave him a big spoonful. "Don't let it drip," she said. "Does Patrick want to stay for supper?"

"I don't know—I'll ask," said Omri.

"Were you two fighting up there? I heard thumps."

"No-o—not really. It was just that he wanted to do something that I—"

Omri stopped dead, as if frozen to the ground. He might have been frozen, his face went so cold. Patrick was up there—with the cupboard—and two biscuit tinsful of little plastic figures—alone!

Omri ran. He usually won the egg-and-spoon race at the school sports, which was just as well—it's hard enough to carry an egg in a spoon running along a flat field; it's a great deal harder to carry a tablespoonful of boiling hot stew steady while you rush up a flight of stairs. If most of it was still there when he got to the top it was more by good luck than skill because he was hardly noticing the spoon at all—all he could think of was what might be—no, *must* be happening in his room, and how much more of it would happen if he didn't hurry.

He burst in through the door and saw exactly what he'd dreaded—Patrick, bent over the cupboard, just turning the key to open it.

“What—” Omri gasped out between panting breaths, but he had no need to go on. Patrick, without turning around, opened the cupboard and reached in. Then he did turn. He was gazing into his cupped hands with eyes like huge marbles. He slowly extended his hands toward Omri and whispered, “Look!”

Omri, stepping forward, had just time to feel intensely glad that at least Patrick had not put a whole handful of figures in but had only changed one. But which? He leaned over, then drew back with a gasp.

It was the cowboy. And his horse.

The horse was in an absolute panic. It was scrambling about wildly in the cup of Patrick’s hands, snorting and pawing, up one minute and down on its side the next, stirrups and reins flying. It was a beautiful horse, snow-white with a long mane and tail, and the sight of it acting so frightened gave Omri heart pains.

As for the cowboy, he was too busy dodging the horse’s flying feet and jumping out of the way when it fell to notice much about his surroundings. He probably thought he was caught in an earthquake. Omri and Patrick watched, spell-bound, as the little man in his plaid shirt, buckskin trousers, high-heeled leather boots, and big hat, scrambled frantically up the side of Patrick’s right hand and, dodging through the space between his index finger and thumb, swung himself clear of the horse—only to look down and

find he was dangling over empty space.

His hat came off and fell, slowly like a leaf, down, down, down to the floor so infinitely far below. The cowboy gave a yell, and scrabbled with his feet against the back of Patrick's hand, hanging on for dear life to the ridge beside his thumbnail.

"Hold your hands still!" Omri commanded Patrick, who in his excitement was jerking them nervously about. There was a moment of stillness. The horse stood up, trembling all over, prancing about with terror. Beside his hooves was some tiny black thing. Omri peered closer. It was the pistol.

The cowboy had now recovered a little. He scrambled back through the finger gap and said something to the horse that sounded like, "Whoaback, steady fella." Then he slid down and grabbed the reins, holding them just below the horse's nose. He patted its face. That seemed to calm it. Then, looking around swiftly but not apparently noticing the enormous faces hanging over him, he reached cautiously down and picked the pistol up from between the horse's hooves.

"Whoa there! Stand—"

Omri watched like a person hypnotized. He wanted to cry out to Patrick that it was a real gun, but somehow he couldn't. He could only think that the sound of his voice would throw the horse once more into a panic and that

horse or man would get hurt. Instead he watched while the cowboy pointed the gun in various directions warily. Then he lowered it. Still holding the reins he moved until he could press his hand against Patrick's skin. Then he let his eyes move upward toward the curved fingers just level with the top of his head.

"What the dawggone heck—" he said. "It sure looks like a great big—aw, what'm Ah talkin' about? It cain't be. Heck, it just ain't possible!" But the more he looked, the more certain he must have become that he was, indeed, in a pair of cupped hands. And finally, after scratching his gingery head for a moment, he ventured to look right up past the fingers, and then of course he saw Patrick's face looking at him.

There was a petrified moment when he couldn't move. Then he raised his pistol in a flash.

"Patrick! Shut your eyes!"

Bang!

It was only a little bang, but it was a real bang, and a puff of real, gun-smelling smoke appeared. Patrick shouted with pain and surprise and would have dropped the pair if Omri hadn't thrust his hand underneath to catch them. Patrick's own hand had clapped itself to his cheek.

"Ow! Ow! He's shot me!" Patrick screamed.

Omri was not much bothered about Patrick at that moment. He was furious with him, and very anxious about

the little man and his horse. Quickly he put them down on the bed, saying, like the cowboy himself, "Steady! Whoa! I won't hurt you! It's okay!"

"Ow!" Patrick kept yelling. "It hurts! Ow!"

"Serves you right, I warned you," said Omri. Then he felt sorry and said, "Let's have a look."

Gingerly Patrick took his hand down. A drop of blood had been smeared on his cheek, and by peering very close Omri could see something very like a bee's stinger embedded in his skin.

"Hang on! I see it—I'll squeeze it out—"

"OW!"

A quick squeeze between his thumbnails and the almost invisible speck of black metal, which had only just penetrated the skin, popped out.

"He—he shot me!" Patrick got out again in a shocked voice.

"I *told* you. My Indian stuck a knife in me," said Omri, not to be outdone. "I think we ought to put him back—your cowboy I mean, of course, not my Indian."

"Put him back where?"

Omri explained how the cupboard could change him back to plastic again, but Patrick wasn't having any of that.

"Oh no! I want him! He's terrific. Look at him now—!"

Patrick feasted his eyes admiringly on the little cowboy, who, ignoring the "giants," whom he clearly thought he



must have imagined, was doggedly dragging his horse across Omri's quilt as if he were wading through the dunes of some infinite pale-blue desert.

Omri reached for him determinedly, but Patrick stepped into his path.

"Don't you touch him! I bought him, I changed him—he's mine!"

"You bought him for me!"

"You said you didn't want him."

"Well, but the cupboard's mine, and I told you not to use it."

"And so what if I did? Anyway, it's done, he's alive now, and I'm keeping him. I'll bash you right in if you try to take him. Wouldn't you bash me if I took your Indian?"

Omri was silent. That reminded him—where was Little Bear? He looked around. He soon spotted him at the other side of the room, busy with his paints. Some beautiful, minute designs, showing turtles, herons, and beavers, mainly in red and yellow, had appeared on the side of the tepee Omri had made. As Omri crouched beside him to admire them, Little Bear, without looking at him, said, "You bring food? I very soon die, if not eat."

Omri looked around. What had he done with the spoonful of stew? But he soon saw that he'd put it down on the table without thinking. There it sat, tilting slightly and spilling a few drops of gravy, but still steaming. He hurried

to get Little Bear's—or rather Action Man's—mess tin (the paper plate had got all soggy) and carefully filled it with the hot, savory stuff.

“Here you are.”

Little Bear stopped work, laid down his paintbrush, and sniffed eagerly.

“Ah! Good!” He sat down cross-legged among the paint lids to eat, dipping some of yesterday's stale bread in as a spoon. “Your wife cook? Ah. No. Little Bear forgot. Omri not got wife.” He ate ravenously for a few moments and then said, “Not want?”

“I'm having mine downstairs in a minute,” Omri said.

“Mean, Omri not want wife,” said Little Bear, who was now in a much better mood.

“I'm not old enough.”

Little Bear looked at him for a moment. “No. I see. Boy.” He grinned. “Big boy, but boy.” He went on eating. “Little Bear want,” he said finally, not looking up.

“Another wife?”

“Chief need wife. Want one beautiful. Good cook.” He put his face into the mess tin and licked it clean. Then he looked up. “With Iroquois, mother find wife for son. But Little Bear mother not here. Omri be mother and find.”

Omri couldn't quite see himself as Little Bear's mother, but he said, “I might try. I think there were some lady Indians in Yapp's. But what if I get one and make her real

and then you don't like her?"

"I like. You get."

"Tomorrow."

Little Bear grinned at him happily, his face smeared with gravy.

Patrick had come up behind him.

"Let's put them together and see what they do!"

Omri jumped up quickly.

"No!"

"Why *not*?"

"You idiot, because yours has got a gun and mine's got a bow and arrow and one of them's sure to kill the other!"

Patrick considered this. "Well, we could take their weapons away from them. Come on, I'm going to!" And he reached toward the bed.

Just at that moment there was the sound of steps on the stairs. They froze. Then Omri swiftly moved the dressing-up crate enough to hide Little Bear, and Patrick sat down on the end of the bed, masking the poor cowboy, who was still toiling along over the humps in the quilt.

Just in time! Omri's mother opened the door the next second and said, "Patrick, that was your mum on the phone. She wants you to come home right away. And Omri—it's supper." And she went.

Omri opened his mouth to protest, but Patrick at once said, "Oh, okay." With one quick movement he had

scooped up cowboy and horse in his left hand and thrust them into his pocket. Omri winced—he could easily imagine the horse's legs being injured by such rough treatment, not to mention the matter of fright. But Patrick was already halfway out the door.

Omri jumped up and grabbed his arm.

"Patrick!" he whispered. "You must be careful! Treat them carefully! They're *people*—I mean, they're alive—what will you do with them? How will you hide them from your family?"

"I won't. I'll show them to my brother, anyway, he'll go out of his mind."

Omri began to think he might go out of his. He shook Patrick's arm. "*Will you think?* How are you going to explain? What will happen? If you say you got him from me I'll do worse than bash you—you'll ruin everything—they'll take the cupboard away—"

That got through to Patrick at last. He put his hand slowly back into his pocket.

"Listen then. You can look after them. But remember—they're mine. If you put them back in the cupboard, I'll tell everyone. I'm warning you. I will. Bring them to school tomorrow."

"To school!" cried Omri aghast. "I'm not bringing Little Bear to school!"

"You can do what you like about Little Bear, he's yours."

The cowboy's mine, and I want him at school tomorrow. Otherwise I'll tell."

Omri let go of his arm and for a moment they looked at each other as if they'd been strangers. But they weren't strangers; they were friends. That counts for a lot in this life. Omri gave in.

"All right," he said, "I'll bring them. Now give them to me. *Gently.*" And Patrick brought man and horse out of his pocket and tipped them very carefully into Omri's waiting hand.

Shooting Match



OMRI PUT THE COWBOY AND horse in his sock drawer while he had the quickest supper on record. Then he raced upstairs again, stopping only to pinch a few grains of Gillon's rat feed for the two horses.

Shut up in his room, he took stock. A room this size was like a sort of indoor national park to the cowboy and the Indian. It should be easy enough to keep them apart for one night. Omri thought first of putting the new pair straight back in the cupboard, and then bringing them back to life next morning in time for school, but he had promised Patrick not to. So he decided to empty out the dressing-up crate and put the cowboy and his horse in there for the night.

The crate was about two feet square, made of planks. There was certainly no visible way out of it for the cowboy. Omri put him carefully down into it. Looking down at him, he felt curious—about his name, where he came from, and so on; but he decided it was better not to talk to him. The cowboy had clearly decided that Omri was not really there at all. When his big hands reached down, carrying some cold stew, grain for the horse, some fragments of apple for them both, and, later, some cotton wool and scraps of material for bedding, the cowboy deliberately covered his eyes by pulling down his big hatbrim. It was only when Omri reached in one final time to give him a drink of water in a minute green glass bottle that he had found in the bathroom cupboard, that the cowboy spoke a word.

"Take that filthy stuff outa here!" he suddenly shouted in his strong Texas accent. "Ah ain't aimin' to drink no more o' that as lawng as Ah live!" And he heaved the bottle (which was almost as big as himself) up by its base and tipped its contents out onto the boards at the bottom of the crate.

"It's only water," Omri ventured to say.

"You shet yer mouth!" shouted the little man. "Ah won't take no lip from no gol-darned hallucy-nation, no, sir! Mebbe Ah do drink too much, mebbe Ah cain't hold m'likker like some o' them real tough guys do. But if'n Ah'm gittin' the dee-lirium tremens, and startin' in to see things, why couldn't Ah see pink elly-fants and dancin' rats

and all them purty things other fellas see when they gits far gone? It ain't fair fer me to see giants and blue deserts and git put in boxes the size of the Grand Canyon with no one but m'little hoss fer comp'ny!" He sat down on the pile of hay, took the horse's nose in his arms, put his face against it, and began to sob.

Omri was shattered. A cowboy crying! He didn't know what to do. When his mother cried, as she did sometimes when things got too much, she only asked to be left alone till she felt better. Maybe all grown-ups were like that. Omri turned away and got slowly into his pajamas, and then went to see how Little Bear was getting along on the far side of the crate.

He'd finished the painting. The tepee looked really good. Little Bear was now in the longhouse, arranging his blanket for the night. The pony was tethered to his post on a long rope. Omri took out the rat food and gave it to him. Then he called Little Bear out.

"Are you okay? Anything you need?"

He should have known better than to ask.

"Plenty! Want fire in longhouse, keep warm, keep animals away. Want tomahawk—"

"So you can chop bits out of my leg?"

"Little Bear angry when say that. Sorry now. Use tomahawk cut down trees, chop firewood, kill fish—"

"What fish?"

Little Bear replied with a very good imitation of a fish swimming. Then he did a mime of catching it, putting it onto a block, and, with a whirl of his arm, chopping off its head with gleeful relish.

"I don't know about that!"

"You get. Tomorrow. Fish from plass-tick. Good tools. But fire—now. Chief Little Bear say!"

Omri sighed. He went to the wastepaper basket and picked out the remains of the other fire that he'd thrown away in there. There was quite a lot of the firelighter left. He gathered up some of the bits of willowbark and twigs from where Little Bear had been working. "You're not having it inside, though—far too dangerous!"

He arranged the fire on the packed earth of the seed tray, about six inches from the entrance to the longhouse, first moving the tepee to safety. Then he struck a match and soon there was a cozy blaze.

Little Bear crouched beside it, his red skin glowing and his eyes bright with pleasure.

"Little Bear, can you dance?"

"Yes. Many kinds."

"Would you do one now so I can see?"

He hesitated, then he shook his head once.

"Why not, though?"

"No reason dance."

"Maybe if I got you a wife—"

The Indian looked up eagerly. "You get? Give word?"

"I only said I'd try."

"Then Little Bear dance. Then do best dance—love dance."

Omri turned off his light and drew back from the scene. It looked amazingly real, with the fire making shadows, the little horse munching his grain, and the Indian sitting on his heels warming himself, wearing his colorful headdress and chief's cloak. Omri wished he himself were small enough to join Little Bear by the fire.

"Om-ri! Are you in bed? I'm coming up in five minutes to kiss you good night!"

Omri felt panicky. But it was all right. The fire was going out. Already Little Bear was standing up, yawning and stretching. He peered up through the darkness.

"Hey Omri! Paintings good?"

"Great!"

"You sleep now?"

"Yes."

"Peace of Great Spirits be with you."

"Thanks, same to you."

Omri peered quickly into the crate. The poor cowboy had crawled away into his makeshift bed and was snoring loudly. He hadn't eaten a thing. Omri sighed. He hoped Patrick was making plans and arrangements. After all, if Omri could keep his Indian secret, Patrick might be able to

do the same. All might yet be well. But Omri certainly wasn't going to try the experiment again. It was all just too much worry.

He climbed into bed, feeling unusually tired. His mother came in and kissed him, and the door was shut. He felt himself drifting off almost right away. . . .

When suddenly a piercing whinny sounded. And was answered by another.

The horses had smelled each other!

They were not so far apart—and the cowboy's wasn't tied up. Omri could hear his little hooves clattering on the bare boards of the crate, and then the whinnies began again, high, shrill—almost questioning. Omri thought of putting on his light, but he was awfully tired—besides, what could he do? They couldn't possibly reach each other through the planks of the crate wall. Let them whinny their heads off, they'd soon get fed up.

Omri rolled over and fell asleep.

He was awakened just after dawn by shots.

He was out of bed in about one fifth of a second. One glance into the crate showed him all too clearly that the cowboy and his horse had escaped. The second glance showed how: A knot in the wood had been pushed out (or perhaps kicked out by the horse), leaving an oval-shaped hole like an arched doorway, just big enough to let horse and rider through.

Omri looked around wildly. At first he could see nothing. He dropped to his knees beside the seed box and peered into the longhouse. Little Bear was not there—nor was his horse.

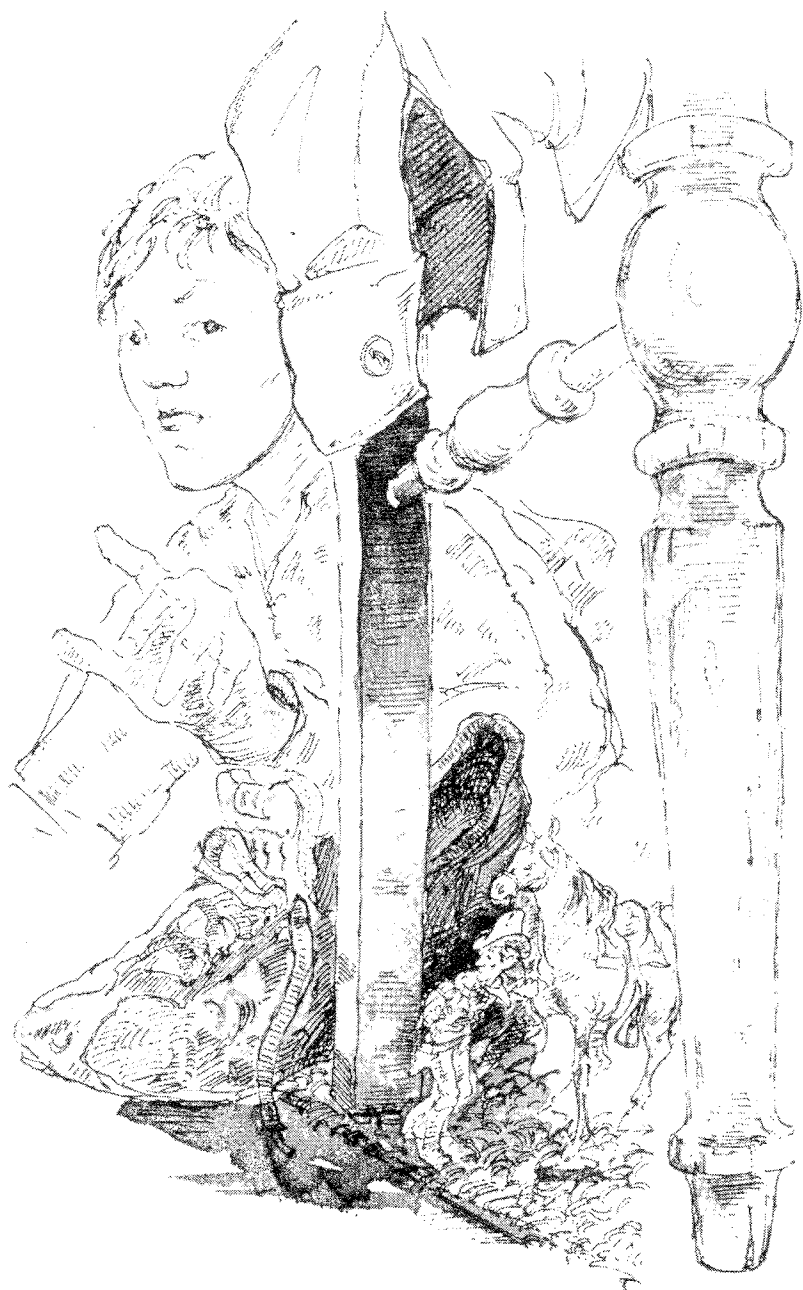
Suddenly some tiny thing whizzed past Omri's ear and struck the crate beside him with a ping! Twisting his head, Omri saw it—a feathered arrow the size of a pin, still quivering from its flight.

Was Little Bear shooting at *him*?

"Little Bear! Where are you?"

No answer. But suddenly, a movement, like that of a mouse, caught the corner of his eye. It was the cowboy. Dragging his horse behind him, he was running, half bent over, from behind one chair leg to another. He had his revolver in his hand, his hat on his head. Another arrow flew, missing the crate this time and burying itself in the carpet—just ahead of the running cowboy, who stopped dead, jumped backward till his horse hid him, and then fired another two shots from behind the horse's shoulder.

Omri, following his aim, spotted Little Bear at once. He and his horse were behind a small heap of cloth, which was like a snow-covered hill to them but was actually Omri's vest, dropped carelessly on the floor the night before. Little Bear, safe in the shelter of this cotton mountain, was just preparing to shoot another arrow at the cowboy, one that could hardly fail to hit its mark. The poor fellow was now



scrambling desperately onto his horse to try to ride away and was in full sight of the Indian as he drew back his bow-string.

“Little Bear! Stop!”

Omri’s frenzied voice rang out. Little Bear did not stop; but his surprise spoiled his aim, and the arrow sped over the cowboy, doing no worse than sweep away his big hat and pin it to the baseboard behind the chair.

This infuriated the little man, who, forgetting his fear, stood up in his stirrups and shouted, “Tarnation take ya, ya red varmint! Wait’ll Ah ketch ya. Ah’ll have yer stinkin’ red hide for a sleepin’ bag!”

With that he rode straight toward the vest-hill at full gallop, shouting out strange cowboy war cries and waving his gun, which, by Omri’s count, still had two bullets in it.

Little Bear had not expected this, but he was only out-faced for a moment. Then he coolly drew another arrow from his quiver and fitted it to his bow.

“Little Bear, if you shoot I’ll pick you up and *squeeze* you!” Omri cried.

Little Bear kept his arrow pointing toward the oncoming horseman.

“What you do if he shoot?” he asked.

“He won’t shoot! Look at him.”

Sure enough, the carpet was too soft for much galloping, and even as Omri spoke the cowboy’s horse stumbled

and fell, pitching its rider over its head.

Little Bear lowered his bow and laughed. Then, to Omri's horror, he laid down the bow among the folds of the vest, reached for his knife, and began to advance on the prostrate cowboy.

"Little Bear, you are not to touch him, do you hear?"

Little Bear stopped. "He try to shoot Little Bear. White enemy. Try take Indians' land. Why not kill? Better dead. I act quick, he not feel, you see!" And he began to move forward again.

When he was nearly up to the cowboy Omri swooped on him. He didn't squeeze him, of course, but he did lift him high and fast enough to give him a fright.

"Listen to me now. That cowboy isn't after your land. He's got nothing to do with you. He's Patrick's cowboy, like you're my Indian. I'm taking him to school with me today, so you won't be bothered by him anymore. Now you take your horse and get back to your longhouse and leave him to me."

Little Bear, sitting cross-legged in the palm of his hand, gave him a sly look.

"You take him to school? Place you learn about ancestors?"

"That's what I said."

He folded his arms, offended. "Why you not take Little Bear?"

Omri was startled into silence.

"If white fool with coward's face good enough, Indian Chief good enough."

"You wouldn't enjoy it—"

"If he enjoy, I enjoy."

"I'm not taking you. It's too risky."

"Risky? Firewater?"

"Not *whiskey*—risky. Dangerous."

He shouldn't have said that. Little Bear's eyes lit up.

"Like danger! Here too quiet. No hunting, *him* only enemy," he said scornfully, peering over the edge of Omri's hand at the cowboy, who, despite the softness of his landing place, was only just scrambling to his feet. "Look! He no use for fight. Little Bear soon kill, take scalp, finish. Very good scalp," he added generously. "Fine color, look good on belt."

Omri looked across at the cowboy. He was leaning his ginger head against his saddle. It looked as if he might be crying again. Omri felt very sorry for him.

"You're not going to hurt him," he said to the Indian, "because I won't let you. If he's such a coward, it wouldn't do your honor any good anyway."

Little Bear's face fell, then grew mulish. "No tell from scalp on belt if belong to coward or brave man," he said slyly. "Let me kill and I do dance around campfire," he coaxed.

"No—" Omri began. Then he changed his tactics. "All right, you kill him. But then I won't bring you a wife."

The Indian looked at him a long time. Then he slowly put his knife away.

"No touch. Give word. Now you give word. Take Little Bear to school. Take to plass-tick. Let Little Bear choose own woman."

Omri considered. He could keep Little Bear in his pocket all day. No need to take any chances. If he were tempted to show the other children, well, he must resist temptation, that was all.

And after school he could take him to Yapp's. The boxes with the plastic figures in them were in a corner behind a high stand. Provided there weren't too many other kids in the shop, he might be able to give Little Bear a quick look at the lady Indians before he bought one, which would be a very good thing. Otherwise he might pick an old or ugly one without realizing it. It was so hard to see from their tiny plastic faces what they would look like when they came to life.

"Okay then, I'll take you. But you must do as I tell you and not make any noise."

He put him down on the seed tray and gently shooed the horse up the ramp. Little Bear tied it to its post, and Omri gave it some more rat food. Then he crawled on hands and knees over to where the cowboy was now sitting

dolefully on the carpet, his horse's rein looped around his arm, looking too miserable to move.

"What's the matter?" Omri asked him.

The little man didn't look up. "Lost mah hat," he mumbled.

"Oh is that all?" Omri reached over to the baseboard and pulled the pinlike arrow out of the wide brim of the hat. "Here it is," he said kindly, laying it in the cowboy's lap.

The cowboy looked at it, looked up at Omri, then stood up and put the hat on. "You shore ain't no reg'lar hallucy-nation," he said. "I'm obliged to ya." Suddenly he laughed. "Jest imagine, thankin' a piece o' yer dee-lirium tremens fer givin' you yer hat back! Ah jest cain't figger out what's goin' on around here. Say! Are you real, or was that Injun real? 'Cause in case you ain't noticed, you're a danged sight bigger'n he is. You cain't both be real."

"I don't think you ought to worry about it. What's your name?"

The cowboy seemed embarrassed and hung his head. "M'name's Boone. But the fellas all call me Boohoo. That's on account of Ah cry so easy. It's m'soft heart. Show me some'n sad, or scare me just a little, and the tears jest come to mah eyes. Ah cain't help it."

Omri, who had been somewhat of a crybaby himself until very recently, was not inclined to be scornful about this, and said, "That's okay. Only you needn't be scared of

me. And as for the Indian, he's my friend and he won't hurt you, he's promised. Now I'd like you and your horse to go back into that big crate. I'll stick the knot back in the wood, you'll feel safer. Then I'll get you some breakfast." Boone brightened visibly at this. "What would you like?"

"Aw shucks, Ah ain't that hungry. Coupla bits o' steak and three or four eggs sittin' on a small heap o' beans and washed down with a jug o' cawfee'll suit me jest dandy."

"You'll be lucky," thought Omri.