MY BROTHER SAM IS DEAD

Tim was caught in the middle of war.

A NEWBERY HONOR BOOK

James Lincoln Collier
I'd say, "Yes, sir," or something like that and get away as soon as I could. I couldn't figure out what he thought about the whole thing, and finally I just forgot about it.

The war went on. It didn't seem to have much to do with us most of the time, aside from Sam being gone. Of course food was short, and other things, too. The men who still had their guns had trouble getting powder and shot. Cloth was getting scarce, and leather, because the Continental troops needed them for clothing and shoes. But nobody was really desperate.

Sometimes we'd be reminded of the war when militiamen marched through. Or we might see a soldier who had been wounded or whose enlistment was up walking back to his home. But mostly the war stayed away from us.

Twice we got letters from Sam. Or rather, Mother did. One came in August of that year and another one in September. The first one told about the fighting in New York. The Rebel troops had been beaten there, and the British had taken over the city, but the way Sam wrote about it, he made it seem like a glorious victory for the Rebels. He said that his regiment had made a magnificent retreat, and the British were lucky they'd got out of it alive, but it sounded the other way around to me. The second letter didn't tell so much, except that they were encamped someplace in New Jersey and probably would stay there for the winter. He was living a hard life. A lot of times they were on very short rations, eating just hardtack and water day after day. They didn't have proper clothing, either. Some of the men had no shoes and went barefoot: in cold weather they wrapped cloth around their feet to keep from freezing. I guess there wasn't much glory in it a lot of the time, but Sam said that their spirits were high.

Mother and Father had a fight over the letters. When the first one came Mother decided to answer it. Father said no, she shouldn't encourage Sam in his recalcitrance. Mother argued with him, but he wouldn't give in: let Sam feel our disapproval until he comes to his senses. But then when the second letter came she said she was going to write an answer regardless. They had an argument about it when I was supposed to be asleep. I kept hoping Mother would win. It made me sad to think of Sam writing letters and nobody writing back, although I guess Betsey Read would write back. But Father didn't feel that way. "The boy has to learn a lesson, he's far too headstrong."

"He isn't a boy anymore," Mother said.

"He's sixteen years old, that's a boy, Susannah."

"He's seventeen, Life. How old were you when you left home?"

"That was different," he growled. "There were
eight of us, remember, too many mouths to feed as it was."

"Still, you went off at sixteen, Life."

"Sam's too headstrong."

"And you're not?"

"I'm his father, I don't have to be questioned on my behavior."

Mother laughed. "You hate having anyone tell you what to do, yet you expect Sam to let you order him around. I'm going to write to him, Life. He must surely be worried that we're all right."

"I don't want you to do it, Susannah."

"I know you don't, Life. But I'm going to do it anyway."

I heard Father make a grunting sound, and then the door banged, and he stomped out to the barn. In the dark I clapped my hands. I was glad that Sam was going to get a letter.

But by that fall of 1776 I didn't have much time for pondering over Sam or Mr. Heron. Father was planning his usual trip to Verplanck's Point, and this year for the first time I was going with him. It was pretty nearly forty miles. I'd never been on so long a trip in my life. Sam used to go to help Father, and after Sam went off to college Father got Tom Warrups to go with him. But Tom was busy, and so this time Father had to take me.

Verplanck's Point was on the Hudson River, just south of a town called Peekskill. Boats from New York City and Albany stopped there for trading. The idea of our trip was to drive cattle to Verplanck's Point where we could sell them, and then use the money to buy supplies we needed for the tavern and the store—rum, cloth, pots and pans, needles and thread and all sorts of things. The traders brought these things up the river from New York and sold them to merchants at towns along the way, like Verplanck's Point. And of course the merchants there wanted cattle to ship down to New York where there was a need for beef.

In October Father began gathering cattle. Some he got from farmers who paid their bills to him with cattle every year. Some he just bought, knowing he could sell them at a profit. It would take us three days to drive the cattle over and three days to come back. On horseback you could ride it in a day, but we'd have not only the cattle but the wagon drawn by oxen with us. Going over we'd have a few pigs in the wagon; coming back we'd carry the things we bought in it.

On the way we'd stop at places where Father knew people. One night we would spend with those cousins of mine I'd never met. Father always stopped at the same places. They expected him every year: it was a good chance to catch up on family news.

The trip was planned for the end of November. It
was best to go as late in the year as you could, because the closer to winter it was, the scarcer beef was and the higher the price you could get. But if we waited too long, it would snow and then we would have trouble. Most of the time it was easier to travel when the snow was on the ground. You just hitched a horse to a sledge and slid over the packed snow. But it was hard to drive cattle in snow, and it was hard to pasture them along the way, too. So about the beginning of November Father began keeping a sharp eye out on the weather. He'd consult some almanacs, which usually disagreed, and he'd ask certain farmers who were supposed to be good judges of weather when they thought the snow would come. But the weather judges didn't agree any more than the almanacs did, so in the end Father would go out and frown at the sky a dozen times a day, and then make a guess.

The truth is that Father didn't really want to take me. "I don't think you're big enough yet to handle the wagon," he told me.

"I know how to handle the wagon, Father. I've done it lots of times."

"Around here, yes. But not with thirty cows to look after as well. Besides, the woods are full of those cow-boys over there. They claim they're patriots gathering beef for the troops, but really they're nothing more than thieves. And we don't have a gun anymore."

Father was right about the thieves who people called cow-boys. We'd heard all kinds of stories from travelers about them. All of that part of Westchester County, from the Connecticut border over to the Hudson River, had gotten to be a kind of no man's land, with roving bands wandering around plundering people on the excuse that they were part of the war. "I'm pretty brave, Father," I said.

He shook his head. "I don't like taking you, Tim, but I have no choice. There's nobody else to do it."

I was glad there was nobody else to do it. It was pretty boring hanging around the tavern day after day, making fires and chopping wood and cleaning up and looking after the chickens and Old Pru and the pigs. There would be a lot of exciting things on the trip—meeting my cousins and seeing the Hudson River which they said was a mile wide, and watching the boats sail up and down it. Besides it would get me out of school for a few days.

So Father collected cattle and watched the weather; and on the twentieth of November he came in from his weather look saying, "It's cloudy and getting chilly. I think we'd better start off in a day or two."

It was a good guess. When we started out two days later there was a half an inch of snow on the ground which had fallen during the night. The sun came up later on and melted it, making the roads muddy, es-
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especially after the cattle had churned it up. I walked alongside the wagon guiding the oxen and keeping them moving when they slowed down. We had four hogs in the cart, with their feet tied together. They were always trying to get out, and I had to make sure they didn’t get loose. Father rode our horse Grey along behind the cattle to keep them moving. We went pretty slowly. There wasn’t much to do except to look around at the hills and fields. It seemed pretty exciting when we passed a house, especially if there were some people there. A couple of times there were children staring out the windows as we went by. It made me feel proud of myself for being a man while they were still children, and I shouted at the oxen and smacked them on their rumps with my stick, just to show off how casual and easy I was with oxen and how used I was to managing them.

Father’s plan was to go up through Redding Ridge to Danbury, and then turn a bit southward to go through Ridgebury and across the border into New York, where we’d spend the night in North Salem with our cousins. We’d spend the second night with friends of Father’s at their farm near Golden’s Bridge. It wasn’t the straightest way over to Verplanck’s Point, but Father went that way because it took us past our cousins’ place.

We reached Ridgebury around lunchtime. We didn’t stop to eat, but chewed on some biscuits and drank some beer for thirst as we walked along. We couldn’t have a conversation, really: the cattle made too much noise as they tromped along mooing, and we had to shout to hear each other. And that was why we didn’t hear the men riding up on us until they came in sight over a little hill in front of us.

There were six of them, and they were carrying weapons—mostly old muskets, but one or two of them had swords and pistols. They were dressed in ordinary clothing—brown shirts and trousers and muddy boots. As they came toward us, I began to turn the oxen to the side of the road so they could pass. But they didn’t go on by. They charged up to us, surrounded us, and stopped. I knew they were cow-boys. I pulled the wagon’s long brake lever and whoa-ed the oxen. The cattle stopped going forward and began milling around. I turned and looked back at Father.

He sat on his horse among the cattle looking very calm. “What’s this?” he said.

One of the cow-boys pushed through the cattle to get close enough to Father to talk. “What’s your name?”

“What business is it of yours?” Father said. I was hoping Father wouldn’t argue with the man—it scared me.

“Government business,” the cow-boy said.
“No doubt,” Father said.
“Answer the question or we’ll hang you and the boy from the nearest tree.”
“My name’s Meeker,” Father said.
“Where from?”
“Redding.”
“Redding?” The man turned in his saddle and spit onto the muddy road. “Tory country,” he said. “I suppose this cattle is going to end up in Lobsterback stomachs.”

Father shrugged. “Where it ends up I don’t know and I don’t care. I’ve been selling my beef at Verplancks Point for ten years, and I haven’t yet asked who was going to eat it.”

“Times have changed, Meeker. Now we want to know who’s doing the eating. And we don’t want it to be Lobsterbacks. There’s only one place where beef goes from Verplancks Point and that’s New York. And the British army owns New York.”

I was getting pretty scared. He was tough-looking.
Father shrugged again. “I can’t tell anybody what to do with a cow after I’ve sold it to him. That’s his business.”

“So the point then is not to sell it to the wrong people, isn’t it?”
“I can’t tell who—”
“Get down off that horse, Tory.”

“I don’t think I like being called that,” Father said calmly.
“Please, Father,” I said.
“Jesus,” the cow-boy said. “All right if you don’t want to get down from the horse, we’ll knock you off it.” He pulled a pistol from his belt and pushed his horse a few steps further until he was within reach of Father.

“Father,” I shouted.
He grimaced and shook his head. Then he got down from the horse.

“That’s better,” the man said. “Now you and the boy walk out into the middle of that field and sit down.”

I looked at Father. “Do what he says, Tim. Go out there.”
“Aren’t you coming?”
“Go, Tim.”

By now the cattle were wandering around all over the place. Some of them had gone up the road ahead of the wagon. Others were edging out into the pastures alongside the road looking for forage. I pushed past a couple of cows, trotted out into the middle of the field, and sat down about fifty yards away from where Father was standing among the cows talking to the cow-boys. I knew he was trying to talk them out of taking the cows. If we lost our cattle, we’d be in a lot of
trouble because we'd have no way of getting rum and the things we needed to run the store and the tavern.

I could see him gesturing—pointing up the road and then out to me as he explained something to the men. I wondered if he was scared. He seemed so calm and cool with the cow-boys, but I wondered if down underneath he was really scared. I knew I was scared.

Then I saw the man who had been doing all the talking lean down from the horse and hit Father with something—the barrel of his pistol I guessed. Father put his hands up to cover his head. The man hit him again and Father disappeared. He just dropped down among the cows and I couldn't see him anymore. I jumped up, but Father didn't get up and I still couldn't see him. “Father,” I shouted. The cow-boys turned to look at me. “Please,” I shouted. “Please don't hit him anymore.”

The men turned away from me. The man who had hit Father got off his horse and stood there beside it, staring down at the ground. I knew he was looking at Father. He was still holding the pistol in his hand. “Please don't shoot him,” I shouted. “Please.”

This time they didn't even turn around to look at me. The man on foot kept waving the pistol around. He seemed to be talking, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I stood in the middle of the field trying to think. Maybe I could run across the fields and find a farmhouse where they might be able to get some people to come and save Father. But if the cow-boys saw me running, they could easily catch me in the open fields, and ride me down if they wanted. I didn't know if I was brave enough to take a chance. The cow-boys were still looking down at Father. I turned and began to run across the field. Behind me I heard somebody shout. Then I heard horses galloping. I swirled around to look. The cow-boys were galloping off down the road in the direction they had come from, leaving the cattle and the wagon standing in the middle of the field. I stared; and then a different group of riders came charging up the road from the other direction. There were a dozen of them, and they were driving hard. As they came up to the cattle still milling about on the road they reined up sharply. Then most of them threaded their way through the cattle and dashed on, leaving two behind. I saw Father stand up, and I began running back across the road to the field.

The new horsemen had dismounted, and by the time I reached Father, they were helping him to the side of the road. I ran up. “Don't worry, Tim,” he said. “I'm all right.”

He had a bad cut on his head which was still bleeding and another smaller one over his eye. His eye was swollen and it was going to be black and blue by the next day. He sat down on the ground while one of the
men washed the cut on Father's head with water from a leather canteen and bandaged it with Father's own handkerchief.

"Who were those people?" Father asked. "Cowboys?"

"Cattle thieves is a better name. We had reports that they were riding this morning, and we've been looking for them all day. You're a Loyalist, I take it?"

"I'm interested in making a living, not fighting a war," Father said. "My boy and I are just trying to get this beef to Verplanck's Point the way I do every year."

"Verplanck's Point?" The man grinned. "It'll go to New York, then. We'll see that it gets there. There are still a lot of people loyal to His Majesty in these parts."

So they did. They waited until the others gave up on the chase and came back, and then they rode with us to the New York line. We waited there again until they got us another escort to take us farther along the way, and we crossed over into New York, the first time I'd ever been in a colony besides Connecticut. It disappointed me. It didn't look any different and I didn't feel any different, either. Here I was in a foreign country, and it was just like being at home.
in another. The boys slept out in the barn except during the coldest weather, when they made up pallets on the floor in front of the kitchen fireplace. When I saw how crowded they were, I realized that I was lucky not to have been raised on a farm: there was usually plenty of room in the tavern for me and Sam.

We got there after dark. They gave Father and me some bread and stew, and they all crowded into the kitchen to talk. It seemed like they all wanted to talk at once. They hadn't seen Father for a year and they wanted all the news: how Mother was and what the war was like in Redding and where Sam was and all the rest of it. They were curious about me—they'd been hearing about me for twelve years, and finally they were seeing me with their own eyes. And I'd been hearing about them all that time, too, and it was interesting for me to see them.

I felt shy, but they didn't because it was their house. So they began asking me a lot of questions until Mr. Platt made them all be quiet so he and Father could talk. Father told them about the scary thing that had happened on the way over.

Mr. Platt just nodded. He was a tall, thin man, and his clothes hung on him loosely. "They call themselves Patriots. They say they're only trying to keep people from selling beef to the British, but don't believe it. They'll take it and sell it to the British themselves if nobody else will buy. They're just cattle thieves." He was angry. "Lawlessness has run wild, common decency between people has disappeared, every man is armed against his neighbor."

"In Redding we still have law and order," Father said.

"We should have it here, too. There are plenty of Loyalists in Westchester County, but there's no control. Rebel and Tory live almost in open warfare with each other."

With hot food in my stomach and the open fire nearby, I was having a hard time staying awake. I knew I ought to go to bed because we had another hard day ahead of us, but I didn't want to miss the talk.

"I'm happy we haven't got to that point in Redding," Father said.

"You're fortunate. People have been tarred and feathered here, houses have been burned and livestock slaughtered. Both sides are doing it—one side burns a house and the other side retaliates. It won't be long before they're hanging people. I tell you it's true, Life."

"What about the party that escorted us here?"

"That's one of our Committees of Safety. They're about all we have to keep order. You were lucky—somebody along the way saw you pass by and knew there'd be trouble. There'll be trouble all the way to the Hudson."
My Father shook his head. "I suppose that next year I won't be able to get over here at all without an armed guard escorting me all the way."

"I judge you're right, Life."

My eyelids closed. I struggled to open them again, and then the next thing I knew Father was shaking me and saying, "Come on, Tim, time for bed."

My cousin Ezekiel Platt took me out to the barn. He was only a little older than me. He was tall and skinny like his father and had red hair. We climbed up into the loft, wrapped some hay up in blankets for pallets, and settled into bed. Ezekiel was curious about me and wanted to talk. "Were you scared when those men came?"

I didn't like to admit I was scared, but I didn't want to lie, either. "Some," I said. "Did you ever have that happen to you?"

"We haven't had any trouble yet, but Father says that's just because we've kept our noses clean. We don't make an issue of being Loyalists," he said.

"Are you a Loyalist?" I asked.

"Of course. Arent you?"

"I guess so," I said. "Only sometimes I'm not sure. Sam's fighting for the Rebels, did you know that?"

"We heard that," Ezekiel said. "Father got into a rage. He said that Sam was too smart a boy to be fooled by sedition."

"He fought in the battle for New York," I said. "Father says he's headstrong, but he's very daring besides being smart."

"My father didn't think he was so smart for joining the Rebels. They're likely to be hung when the war's over."

"Maybe they'll win," I said.

"They can't. How can they beat the whole British army? It'll serve them right for being disloyal."

"Well I don't know," I said. "The way Sam explains it, it sounds right to be a Rebel. And when Father explains it, it sounds right to be a Loyalist. Although if you want to know the truth, I don't think Father really cares. He's just against wars."

We didn't say anything for a while. "If you go to be a soldier, which side would you fight on?"

"The loyalist, I guess." But in my head I wasn't sure about that. Suppose one day we were fighting and I suddenly saw that it was Sam I was aiming my gun at?

We woke up before the sun, hitched the oxen to the wagon, herded the cattle out of the Platt's pasture where they had spent the night, and started off again on the road toward Peekskill. Peekskill was on the Hudson River. We would turn south there and go down the river about five miles to Verplanks Point. From North Salem to Peekskill was more than twenty miles. It would take us all day to make fifteen miles to
our next stop, Father’s friends south of Mohegan. We were supposed to pick up another escort. I hoped we would find it soon. I didn’t like traveling through this country alone, and I kept looking around all the time for galloping horsemen.

The escort picked us up at Purdy’s Station. They stayed with us for about ten miles and then another escort took over. We spent the night with Father’s friends, pasturing the cattle in one of their fields. In the morning another escort took us to Peekskill. It was a pretty big town—hundreds of people lived there. It was on the edge of the Hudson River, and as we rolled down the hill into the town we suddenly could see the water. I couldn’t believe it—it was the biggest river I’d ever seen. Across the other side were beautiful hills, some of them craggy and rocky, dropping straight down to the water’s edge. It was so beautiful I could hardly keep my eyes off it. “Father, it’s so big,” I said.

He grinned. “This is nothing, Tim. Wait till we get down to Verplanck’s Point. The river there is three miles wide.”

The escort left us at Peekskill. We turned south, following a road that went along the river. Oh, it was exciting to me. There were all kinds of boats going up and down or moored offshore. Scattered along the river bank were docks and wharves with skiffs and rowboats tied up to them. Men and boys were fishing from the docks, and sometimes we could see people out in boats seining. It seemed like fun, a lot more fun than being a tavern-keeper.

“I wished we lived here, Father,” I said.

He shrugged. “If wishes were horses beggars would ride.”

“Still,” I said.

“Oh, the river’s pretty,” he said, “but fishing’s hard work. You try hauling one of those seines up from the bottom sometime and you’ll find out.”

“Are the people here Loyalists?”

“A mixture. The Dutch settled most of the land up and down the Hudson. There are a lot of them still here and they don’t much care for the English crown.”

We reached Verplanck’s Point at the end of the afternoon. It was a wedge-shaped spit of land which poked out into the river. Father had been right; the river was gigantic here. I could just barely make out the houses on the hillside across it they were so far away. It was like a huge lake filled with boats. “They call this part of the river Haverstraw Bay,” Father told me.

At Verplanck’s Point the land was not steep, but sloped gradually down to the water. There was a long wharf jutting out into the river, with some boats tied to it. Set back on the land were pens for cattle, sheep and hogs; and around and about were sheds and houses belonging to the men who worked the docks and shipped
the livestock. Most of it went down to New York. There were thousands of British troops quartered in New York, and British sailors, too, besides the regular population of 25,000. They needed as much beef as they could get and prices were going up all the time.

Father found Mr. Bogardus, the man he usually sold his livestock to. We herded the cattle into pens, and untied the poor hogs and turned them loose in the hog pens, too. Then Father said, “I'll be talking business with Mr. Bogardus for a while. Have a look around, but don't stray too far.”

The sun was going down red and cold over the dark hills across the river. It felt good to be free of the animals. I had nothing to worry about for a while and that was nice. Going back would be easy with only the wagon full of goods to watch over. Of course there could always be trouble from the cow-boys, but Father didn't seem worried about it, so I put it out of my mind and wandered down to the wharf to see what was going on. The river was beginning to turn black, and the fishing boats were coming into the wharf. They tied up, and the men and boys in them handed out barrels of fish. I could see that Father had been right: they looked tired and wet and cold and dirty from the mud that came up from the bottom on the nets. One boy about my age got off a boat and just sat right down on the dock and stayed there, all huddled up under his coat, too tired to move.

They carried the fish into one of the sheds near the wharf and began to clean them. It was amazing to me to see how fast they worked—snap-snap-snap with a knife and there was the fish with its head slapped off and opened up into two white fillets. There were a lot of pretty big fish, too—sturgeon, they called it.

Finally I began to get cold myself and walked off the wharf and back up to the pens. It was warmer there by the animals, and after a while Father came along. We staked the oxen out in a bit of grazing common near the pens and went into the tavern for some supper. Father was happy. He had got a good price for the cattle and had negotiated for most of the other things he wanted to bring back to Redding. It was a good wagonload: two hogsheads of rum, a half dozen big sacks of salt, a couple of barrels of molasses; a large chest of tea, a sack of coffee beans, a dozen brass kettles and some tin pots; a chest of breeches and some brass buckles; some drills, knives, files, axes and spades; and small boxes of pepper, allspice, cinnamon, and white powdered sugar.

We slept that night in the tavern. “We ought to sleep in the wagon and save the money,” Father said, “but I guess it’s too cold for that.”

The next morning we loaded the wagon with the things Father had bought and started off. Father tied the horse to the back of the wagon and walked along beside me to help manage the oxen. It was nice having
company. I was sorry to say good-bye to the Hudson River. I liked being there and when we reached Peekskill and turned up the long hill away from it, I kept looking back over my shoulder at the water shining in the sun until we went over the brow of the hill and I couldn't see it anymore.

We spent the night at Father's friends near Mohegan. In the morning we got up at sunrise and left. The sky was cloudy and hung down over our heads like a blanket. “It’s going to snow pretty soon,” Father said.

“It’s cold enough,” I said.

“I think so,” he said. “At night it will be, anyway. I hope we beat it home. I don’t want to travel twenty miles with the oxen slipping and sliding up and down every hill.” He shook his head. “We’ve got a problem, Tim. I want to avoid the Ridgebury area where we ran into those so-called Rebels before. I thought we’d curve south a little, hit into Connecticut at Wilton Parish and then go up through Upawaug to Redding, but that’ll take us a half day out of our way, and with the snow coming, I’m not sure we want to risk it.”

I didn’t feel so easy when I thought about the cowboys. “Do you think they might be waiting for us?”

He shrugged. “They know we have to come back sometime. The people in Mohegan heard that a drover from Norfield had been shot on the Ridgebury Road two days ago and his cattle driven off.”

“Was he killed?”

“Nobody knew. The report may not be reliable anyway.” He shook his head. “I don’t know, Tim, if it snows we ought to go the shortest way home, but I don’t like going back through Ridgebury.”

“If it’s snowing really bad maybe the cow-boys won’t want to come out raiding.”

“There’s that,” Father said.

I didn’t say anything more. Neither being raided nor traveling through the snow was going to be much fun. We just pushed on. There wasn’t much to do; mostly I stayed at the head of the oxen and kept them moving. Sometimes Father walked with me, but sometimes he mounted Grey and rode on ahead a mile or so.

He didn’t tell me what he was doing, but I knew; he was scouting the road ahead for cow-boys.

It began to snow just after noon. It wasn’t much at first—just a few light flakes drifting down from the sky. “Damn,” Father said. “Oh damn.”

“Maybe it’ll stop,” I said.

“No,” he said, “we’re in for it now.”

We pushed on. Ten minutes later the sky was full of flakes falling quietly through the air. It was beginning to feel colder and every once in a while a quick gust of wind would slash the snow into our faces. “It’s going to be a bad one,” Father said.

“Maybe it’ll pass by,” I said.

“I’m afraid not, Tim.” He frowned. “I think we’d better take a chance on going back by Ridgebury. I
don’t think many men will want to ride in deep snow."

By one o’clock it was a real, hard snowfall. The wind had picked up and the snow was blowing into our faces. The oxen became white and wet and they kept shaking their heads to throw the snow off. We walked along with our heads bent forward to keep the wind and snow from flying in our faces. I tucked my hands in my shirt for warmth.

In the middle of the afternoon we reached a fork in the road. "Hold up the oxen," Father said. I prodded them to a stop. He stood by the cart staring around him. There was already six inches of snow on the ground and it was blowing steadily down on us. "We could turn off here for Wilton Parish," he said. Then he shook his head. "There’s no hope for it, Tim. We can’t go on through this all night. We’ll have to push on to North Salem and hole up at the Platt’s until it stops, and then take our chances on Ridgebury."

I didn’t feel very good. My hands were cold and my face was cold, and my feet were getting wet through my boots and they were going to be cold, too. I couldn’t stop thinking about the cow-boys. We’d just been lucky getting away from them the first time. They were bound to be angry with us now for escaping, and they’d want to hurt us to get even. "Can we get an escort through Ridgebury, Father?"

"I don’t know," he said. "We’ll ask at the Platt’s."

The walk seemed to go on and on. The oxen were balking at walking in that blowing snow. They kept trying to turn their backs to it, and it took Father walking on one side of them and me on the other to keep them going straight. They blinked and shook their big heads and bawled. It was queer how the heavy falling snow muffled the sounds of their bawling. Fighting them all the time was tiring. Several times they just stopped and lowered their heads and stood blinking in the snow, and it took us five minutes of beating them and cursing them to get them going again. It seemed to go on endlessly. With all that snow pouring down around us I couldn’t tell where we were. We could only see about twenty yards in any direction—far enough to tell when we might be passing a woodlot or a house if it was close to the road, but that’s all. But Father always knew where we were. "Bear up, Tim," he’d say. "It’s only a mile to Green’s Tavern and just three miles from there."

"Can we warm up at the tavern?"

"The fewer people who know we’re going through, the better," he said. I ducked my head against my chest and tramped on.

It began to get dark. What with the oxen balking so much we were two hours behind schedule. The snow was almost a foot deep and already the oxen were having trouble on the hills, slipping and stumbling when their hooves would strike an icy patch or a pothole hidden beneath the snow. The darkness increased until
it seemed as if we were buried in it. I went on a couple of yards ahead of the oxen to feel out the road, while Father wrestled with them alone. We didn't talk anymore, except when Father cursed. Finding the road was hard. I would have to keep veering from side to side to touch the rail fences and then make a guess about where the middle of the road was. Looking back I could just make out the black lumpy shapes of the oxen and the cart, with Father fighting along at their heads. Once he said, "This is Simple's Crossing. Only two miles, Tim." Two miles seemed like an endless distance.

But finally we saw the spot of light and then the windows shining through the snow. We pulled the oxen through the gate and drove them into the barn. They bawled with happiness. Father went into the house to tell the Platts that we were there. I unhitched the oxen, pitched them some hay, and went into the house myself. There was a great fire burning in the kitchen fireplace and the smell of Johnny cake and hot gravy. My cousins swarmed around to help get my clothes off. I stripped right down to the skin, not caring that the girls were watching. They got me a blanket to wrap up in and a place by the fire and a plate of hot Johnny cake and beans and gravy all over it, and I began to laugh because it felt so good to be warm and safe again. That night my cousins and I slept by the kitchen fire.

When I woke up in the morning it had stopped snowing and the sun was shining. Water was running in small streams off the roof. It was pretty—everything a foot deep in snow and the sun sparkling off the fields. But even though it was pretty I didn't like it. Plowing through snow a foot deep with the oxcart all the way back to Redding was going to be miserable work. Our
feet would get soaked right away and stay wet and cold all day long, and as the snow got warm and then chopped up by the oxen we’d find ourselves stumbling around in a slippery mixture of snow and mud. Mrs. Platt gave us a breakfast of biscuits and gravy. We said good-bye to everybody, hitched up the oxen and pulled out of the yard onto the road. “Are we going to have an escort?” I asked Father.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Platt rode out last night to arrange for one, but with the snow, people may not want to ride. But that works two ways—the raiders may not want to ride, either. You work the oxen; I’m going to ride on ahead.”

So that’s how it went. Father would ride a mile or two and then ride back to see how I was doing; and then he’d ride out again. That way if he ran into the cow-boys he could race back to me and we could find a place to hide. “If you hear me shout, don’t wait, run for the nearest piece of woods you see. They won’t come into the woods on horseback in this snow.”

The only trouble with this plan was that there usually weren’t any woods close to the road. Most of the farmers had used up the trees near their houses and had their woodlots on back land. But still there were patches of woods here and there, so as I plowed along through the snow I kept looking around for woodlots to run to if something happened. It wasn’t going to be easy running in that snow, though.

But there was nothing to do about it but push on. The oxen were more willing to pull than they had been the day before. It was warm enough and there was no snow blowing in their faces. But they kept slipping, especially on the hills, and I would have to tug and pull at them to keep them going forward.

I was alone most of the time because Father was out of sight somewhere up the road. In the snow Grey made very little noise, so that I couldn’t hear him coming. Every once in a while Father would surprise me by riding silently into sight. He’d wave, and I’d wave back to let him know that everything was all right, and he’d ride away again.

I didn’t like being alone so much. Suppose the cow-boys came suddenly up behind me? Or suppose they were hiding in one of the houses or barns along the side of the road? They’d get to me before I could run. As I slogged along I kept turning around and looking down the road behind me, trying to see around corners and through clumps of trees. About every five minutes I would imagine that I was hearing horses, and jump around ready to run for it. Then I would look up and there would be nothing but the empty white sheet lying over the fields and hills.

At lunchtime Father came back. We sat in the wagon, drank some beer and ate some biscuits. “Ridgebury is about two miles up ahead,” he said. “I’ll ride through and come back and then we’ll go through to-
gether. I'll be a lot happier when we're through this place." He shook his head. "We might as well push on and get it over with, Tim," he said. "Bear up, it won't last forever."

We got through Ridgebury all right. Some people came to the tavern door and stared at us as we went through. I guess they thought it queer to see us trying to travel in that snow. Father looked grim. "If nobody knew we were around before, they do now," he said. Then we got out of the village and he rode on ahead again, scouting.

My feet were wet and cold, and I was still hungry—biscuits and beer don't make much of a lunch when you're working oxen along. To keep my mind off my troubles I began trying to name all the countries in the world, which I was supposed to know because I'd learned them in geography. Some were easy to name: England, France, Sweden, Russia. But there were all those little hard ones, like Hesse and Tuscany and Piedmont. It took me a while to decide if I should count America or not. If the Rebels won the war then we would be a country; but Father was sure they were going to lose, so I decided not to count us. Another trouble was keeping them all straight in my head. After I got over twenty I'd sometimes forget whether I'd already counted Serbia or India or some place and have to go back over the whole list again. And I was trying to figure out whether or not I'd counted Arabia when it suddenly hit me that I hadn't seen Father for a long, long time.

I was shocked. How long had it been since the last time he'd ridden silently into sight? I couldn't tell. It seemed like it had to be a half an hour at least, and maybe an hour. I jumped up onto the wagon and looked back across the white countryside, trying to get a feeling of how far I'd come since I last saw him. All I could see was white, a few clumps of trees, a couple of farmhouses, and the muddy black trail of the oxcart winding through it. Where had I been when I last saw Father? I couldn't remember.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it had only seemed like a long time. Maybe being involved with listing all those countries gave me a funny idea of time.

But I didn't believe it; we'd come a long way, as far back over the hills as I could see, and that was a couple of miles. Now I was really worried. Of course there were a lot of simple explanations. Father could have met somebody he knew and started talking. Or he could have gone off somewhere to look for an escort. Or he could have stopped at a farmhouse to get us something warm to eat. There were a lot of explanations, but I knew none of them were true. If he'd been planning to leave me alone for a while he would have told me. He wouldn't have left me by myself this long; he just wouldn't have done it.

So then what? Perhaps something had happened to
Grey. He could easily have tripped in the snow and hurt himself. Maybe Father got hurt in the accident, too. Maybe he twisted an ankle or even broke his leg. No matter what it was, the important thing was for me to catch up to him quickly. I belted the oxen across their rumps with my stick. They grunted and shivered their heads and picked up their pace a little, but five minutes later they had slowed down. I hit them again, this time harder. They went faster but hardly for more than a minute or two. They couldn’t go much faster because of the snow, and even if they could they just weren’t going to. They weren’t horses, they were oxen and they just plain didn’t move fast.

That worried me some more. If Grey had slipped, Father might have been badly hurt. He might be bleeding or even lying unconscious in the snow. And to tell the truth, I was feeling scared and lonely without him. I wanted to find him. So I pulled the oxen as far off to the side of the road as I could, kicked away some snow so they could find some weeds to graze on, and started plowing on up the road as quickly as I could.

It was easy enough to follow Grey’s tracks. Nobody else had been along the road but Father. It was hard trying to jog in the snow, and I began to sweat. Every few minutes I stopped to rest and have a look ahead. If there was a rock or a high stump by the roadside I would climb up on that and look on ahead. But all I saw were the horse tracks running on and on.

I went on along like this for around fifteen minutes covering a good mile and maybe more, when I saw a patch of hemlocks bordering the left-hand side of the road. There was a farmhouse on the hillside behind them. Perhaps Father had gone in there for food or something. I considered cutting off the road across the field to go directly to the farmhouse, but then I decided I’d better stick to following the horse tracks, in case. I plowed on until I came to where the hemlocks began to border the road, casting a cool shadow on the snow. There it was written out for me to see as plain as if I were reading it in a book. The road was all a turmoil of mud and snow marked with dozens of hoofprints. There were more hoofprints in the hemlock grove; and then going on up the road away from me the tracks of three or four horses. The cow-boys had lain in ambush in the hemlock groves, jumped Father, and taken him away someplace.

I stood there in the snow trying to think, but my mind just stopped working. All I could think was that Father was gone. I began silently to pray, “Oh please, God, oh please.” Then suddenly I realized that the cow-boys might be still around, hiding somewhere and watching me. My neck began to prickle and I swung around and stared off across the fields, then back to the hemlocks. There was nobody. All was silence: no sound
of horses, no sound of people talking, no sound of anything but a faint wind breathing in the tops of the hemlocks.

Why hadn’t they come back for the wagon? Perhaps Father had got them to believe some story. Or perhaps they were going to do something with him first and then come after me and the wagon. What I wanted to do was start running and not stop until I got home. It wasn’t more than twelve or fifteen miles: I could make it in three hours if I pushed. I was scared, that was the truth. It felt so lonely to be by myself with Father gone and maybe dead and nobody but myself to do—to do whatever had to be done. I was too scared even to cry; I just felt frozen and unable to move or think of what I should do next.

But finally I told myself that I had to stop being scared, I had to stop just standing there in the middle of the road. To get myself shaken awake I jumped up and down a few times and clapped my hands. That unfroze me a little and I began to think.

The first thing I did was duck back into the hemlocks to hide in case somebody came along. Then I asked myself what Sam would do if it were him, because he’d be brave and smart and do the right thing. And of course Sam wouldn’t go running home. He’d do something daring. The most daring thing to do would be to track down Father, which wouldn’t be too hard in the snow, and rescue him. That would be daring all right: I didn’t have a gun, didn’t have a sword or anything but a knife and a stick.

Then it came to me that even though rescuing Father was the daring thing to do, it wasn’t the smartest thing. So I asked myself another question: what would Father do? And the answer that came pretty quickly was that he’d get the oxen and the wagon and the load of goods back home if he could so we’d have something to run the store and the tavern on through the winter. When I thought about it for a minute more I could see that it was the right answer. Maybe Father would get away; the cow-boys might even let him go after a while. One way or another he would be counting on me to get the wagon home—that was for certain.

I jumped out of the hemlock grove and started jogging back toward the wagon. The oxen wouldn’t have strayed; oxen don’t wander when they’re attached to a heavy wagon. The only risk was that somebody had come along and stolen them or made off with the goods. I went along as fast as I could, all the while looking around for signs of people; but there was nobody and in a few minutes I got back to the wagon. Everything was all right. I picked up my stick, banged the oxen on their rumps and they heaved and grunted and started off.

There wasn’t much point any longer in listening for
the cow-boys. I was pretty certain they’d be along sooner or later, after they’d done—done whatever they were going to do with Father. What I had to do was figure out some way of persuading them to leave me and the wagonload alone. I could always run up into the fields and save myself, but the point was to try to get the wagon home so we could earn our livelihood through the winter.

About half an hour later I came to the hemlock grove and the place along the road where they’d captured Father. Now I began to watch ahead for tracks leading off to the sides of the road where cow-boys might try to ambush me. But I didn’t see anything, and on I went, trying to think of a good story for the cow-boys when they came.

The sun was beginning to get down in the sky behind me. It would be getting dark soon. Already it was getting cold and a bit of a chill wind was springing up. I was just as glad of the dark, though. There were houses to pass by and little villages to go through and in the dark it would be safer. I planned not to stop for the night, but just push on all the way home. Besides, I didn’t know of anyplace to stop; Father had friends along the way but they were strangers to me. I went on thinking about something to tell the cow-boys; and after a while I began to get an idea.

On I went, belting the oxen when they slowed down.

The sun dropped behind the hills in back of me, leaving a red smear on the sky, which slowly turned black. I shivered. I was hungry. There were some more biscuits and jerked beef in a sack in the wagon, and a bottle of wine Mr. Bogardus had given Father for a present. The wine would warm me up a bit. But I decided not to eat or drink anything yet. I knew I was going to be really tired and cold and miserable soon enough, and it would be nice to have the food and the wine to look forward to.

I was thinking about the wine when I saw the cow-boys. They were sitting on horseback in the middle of the road about twenty yards ahead of me—three black figures stock still in the night. The sight of those un-moving figures shocked me, and I almost ran. But I didn’t. Instead I slapped the oxen on their rumps as if I hadn’t any worries about who was standing in the middle of the road. One of the horses stamped and his bridle jingled in the night.

I cleared my throat quietly so I wouldn’t sound scared. Then I shouted, “Are you the escort? Am I ever glad to see you.”

One of them pulled the cover off a lantern he had been holding. A circle of hazy light spilled out into the night, showing bits of horses and faces and guns and the trampled snow. “Pull up the oxen,” the man with the lantern shouted.
I stopped the oxen up and walked forward a few paces. Then the man with the lantern leaned forward to let the light shine on me. “It’s the boy,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Father said that the escort would be along soon, but when you didn’t come I was worried that the cow-boys would get to me first.”

“We’re not the—” one of them started to say.

“Shut up, Carter,” the man with the lantern said. “Come here, boy.”

I took a couple of steps forward. Now the lantern was shining in my eyes, and it was hard for me to look up and see their expressions. All I could see was the horses’ legs and the snow. The man’s voice just came out of the glare. “When did your father say the es—we’d be here?”

“He figured you’d be here an hour ago. That’s why I was so worried. He told me not to worry, but I couldn’t help it. He said that when the shooting started to fall flat and I’d be all right.” I paused. “I thought there’d be more of you, though. Father said there’d be at least a half dozen men in the escort. He said just fall flat when the shooting started.”

There was silence and then one of the others said, “I don’t like this. It sounds like an ambush.”

The man with the lantern swung around a bit to face him. “Are you going to get scared off by a boy’s story?”

“What, sir?” I said.

“Never mind, boy.”

“Do you have anything to eat, sir?”

“Shut up, boy.”

“I don’t like this. Let’s go.”

The man raised the lantern to look at the others. Now I could see their faces a little. Oh they looked tough—unshaven and dirty, wearing swords and pistols, and muskets tucked in behind their saddles. “Are both of you going to be scared off by a boy’s story?” he snarled.

“I still don’t like it. How do you know it’s a story?”

“Oh stop being a couple of old women.”

“It isn’t worth the risk, Judson. Let’s leave.”

“Not worth the risk? There’s a hundred pounds worth of stuff in that wagon.”

“Judson, stealing rum is a hanging matter. I don’t want to—”

Just then a dog barked in the distance. The oxen bawled.

“Damn,” one of them said.

“It’s them.”

“It’s just a dog barking,” Judson shouted.

“I’m not taking the chance.” He wheeled his horse in the snow, and the other did likewise.

“Damn you men,” Judson said. But they had begun to gallop off through the snow. Snarling, he pulled the cover over the lantern, and then he wheeled his horse, too, and disappeared down the road.

I stood for a moment listening to the sound of their
hooves dying out in the snowy road, and then I began to laugh and cry all at once. My hands shook so hard I dropped my stick and my knees were so weak I could hardly walk. I felt terrific, because I’d fooled them; it would be a great story to tell Sam. But everything else was awful—Father being gone and me being alone in the snow and dark and hours to go before I got home.

I climbed into the wagon and ate the biscuits and beef and drank about half the bottle of wine. I guess I was sort of drunk, because I just kept putting one foot in front of the other and by midnight I was home.

Having father gone was strange. The tavern seemed cold and empty, the way it is when you wake up at night and realize that the fires have gone out. Mother didn’t cry, except right at the beginning, the night I told her what had happened. She went on believing that he was alive. “They had no reason to kill him, Timothy. I believe they’re holding him some-