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THE RUNAWAY TAILOR

by

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A rickety cart, pulled by an old blind pony creaked along the narrow trail that led from North Carolina into Tennessee. The canvas cover bulged with shapes of spinning wheel, loom, pots and pans and feather beds. Such furniture as chairs and tables could be made of oak logs in this new country where they would settle.

"Son," called the old woman from the driver's seat, "have we much farther to go?"

"Yes, Ma, we've a few miles yet to reach yon side of the mountain," young Andrew Johnson replied.

The woman's husband, trudging beside the cart as he led their one cow by a leather thong, was tired and would have stopped anywhere so he could rest his weary feet. He looked pleadingly toward his stepson. Then the blind pony balked and would not move a step farther. The sun was not yet overhead, but the seventeen year old boy, now head of the family, gave in.

"This is as good a place as any to have our noon meal," he admitted, pausing beside a clear stream that crossed the road. "Then we can stretch out awhile and rest before we start climbing that hill ahead."

They had been on the road for nearly a month. The towns they passed were few and far apart, and at each one they were tempted to stop and settle. But there was a little village in Tennessee called Greeneville that Andrew Johnson still remembered, and it was there he wanted to live.

"Just a few days more, and we ought to be there," he mused.

The stepfather unhitched the pony to let it graze, then he lay down on the ground and looked on while his wife milked the cow and the boy gathered wood to build a fire.

"I'll make this one in the middle of the road so no panther will come along and turn over our skillet again," Andrew said.

They could laugh about it now, but it hadn't been funny at the time it happened. They had met bears, too, as well as panthers. Andrew had shot many a one along the way. And they knew that as soon as night fell, the wolves would start howling close by. But three years ago, when Andrew Johnson came over this same trail across the Smoky Mountains there had been something worse than wild animals that troubled him. He was fourteen years old then, bound as an apprentice to a tailor, and he was running away from his master. There had been a notice in the Raleigh Star, offering ten dollars reward for his return. That offer still held, and it would for four years more, till he reached man's age.

It had been a risk to go back to his old home, but what else could a boy do when word came that his mother was no longer able to support herself and her lazy, worthless husband by taking in washing and sewing. They were desperately poor and needed his help, so he had gone to bring them back to Tennessee with him.

"Better come eat your dinner, son," the mother called.

Andrew piled his pewter plate with cornmeal mush and a piece of stewed rabbit, and sat down to eat.

"Here they don't ask who a fellow is nor where he's from," he said.

Anyone who offered him work in North Carolina would be prosecuted, for he was a runaway.

"But I'll not ask for work," he went on. "I'll have my own shop in Greeneville, and ladies and gentlemen from all around will come to me with cloth to be cut and made into clothes."

"You'd go far, son, if only you had a little learning," his mother sighed. "It is my one regret that I wasn't able to send you to school instead of putting you to work so young."

"I can get my own learning, Ma, so don't you worry," the boy replied. "Didn't I teach myself to read? And if I did that, I can teach myself to write and cipher, too."

He could write his name, now, and slowly but surely, he was learning to form the letters of other words. Oh there was nothing he couldn't do if he tried hard enough!

While his mother and stepfather rested after eating, he took his one book from under the cover of the cart and sat down to read, running his finger along the printed line and spelling each word slowly. He could have recited the page by heart, but it was better to know each printed word.

"You can have the book, Andy," if you will learn how to read it," the man who read to the apprentices at the tailor shop during the noon hour rest, had said.

Andrew was only a child, much younger than the other apprentices, but the man had noticed how eagerly he had listened to the speeches of famous men read from this book, "The United States Speaker."

Andrew thought of himself in a tailor shop of his own, with apprentices around him.

"I'll have this book read to the boys, not only during their rest hour, but while they work as well," he said.

"Fellow countrymen, I stand here before you -"

The needles would go in and out and eyes would be bent on the cloth, while ears would listen. Then Andrew thought of himself, not only as the tailor, but as the speaker himself.

"Fellow countrymen -"

He could see himself standing before the people of Greenville, the people of Tennessee, even at the White House in Washington,

to the people of the country. There was nothing a boy couldn't do if he made up his mind to do it!

But for all his dreams, here he was, ragged and without a penny to his name, and the sole support of his mother and his stepfather.

"We'd best get on," he said, getting up to hitch the pony to the cart. "We've a steep hill to cross before sundown."

There was a sound of horses' hoofs on the dirt road, and just as they started on their way they saw a group of horsemen galloping toward them. There were shouts and curses as the man charged down the hill without pulling over to let them pass.

"Get that nag off the road," one lashed out at the blind pony.

"Another splashed mud on Andrew's only coat, and laughed in his face.

"Silence!" a tall thin man rode behind them and reigned his horse. He pressed his lips ^{and} stared at the horsemen with a stern frown. The men were subdued, and rode quietly on.

"I apologize for the rudeness of my men," he said. "They have no more right to the road than you."

"Oh, that's all right, sir. We've been jostled about on this trip till we are getting used to it," Andrew Johnson replied.

The man looked at the rickety cart and the old pony, and the worn and patched clothes these three wore.

"So you're coming to settle in Tennessee?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"It's a fine place, son, and I welcome you. A boy like you can make his mark here. I know, for I came over this same trail myself, forty years ago. I am General Jackson."

Andrew Johnson stared at the man as he rode off. General Jackson! Old Hickory! He was known and loved all over the country, yet here he was, welcoming a ragged, penniless boy he did not know.

"There's talk of making him President," the stepfather spoke in awe.

President Andrew Jackson. Only one word to change, and how did it sound? President Andrew Johnson. What one could do, another could do.

"Come on," Andrew Johnson said, turning the pony toward the steep hill ahead. "We've a long way to go before sundown."