

The Little Frontiersman

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Little Tom Graham jumped up to catch a pretty yellow butterfly. But just when he thought he got it, it flew up, away from his grasp. Again he jumped for it, but just as he was about to reach it, someone pulled him back by his arm.

“Hey!” he said, turning to see that it was his older brother, Ben. Tom tried to yank his arm away, but instead Ben quickly pulled him farther from the butterfly.

Tom was about to complain, when suddenly a runaway carriage whooshed past him, clattering over the cobblestones of the street that he had been standing on. That brought Tom back to the bustling reality of city life from the sunny and peaceful little hill he had been imagining.

“You need to be more careful, Tom,” Ben said, pulling his little brother back even farther so that they were up against the brick front of the general store. “If you don’t watch where you’re going, you could get hurt.”

Tom wrenched his arm away from Ben’s grasp and almost hit a man reading a newspaper as he walked past. The man glared at the children before continuing on his way.

“Sorry!” Tom called after the man. Then to Ben he said, “I was being careful,” as he folded his arms and stuck out his lower lip.

Ben rolled his eyes. “You want to be a frontiersman someday, don’t you?”

“Yeah, why?” Tom said with arms still crossed.

“Because if you ever want Mother to let you, you’re going to have to show her you can be one.”

Tom uncrossed his arms. “How?”

“By being more careful,” Ben said, brushing the dirt off Tom’s jacket.

Tom frowned.

“But that’s not the only thing,” Ben added. “There’s lots to learn about being a frontiersman. How about I show you?”

Ben held out his hand for Tom to take. Tom smiled and took it. Anything that had something to do with the frontier interested Tom. It was his absolute favorite subject.

Ben skillfully weaved his way through the busy streets, pulling a skipping Tom behind him. They walked past people, carriages, animals, and buildings made of wood or brick. The farther they walked, the quieter the streets became and the fewer people there were, till at last they reached a part of town where Tom couldn’t remember being before.

Tom looked around wide-eyed. “Are we going to the frontier now?”

Ben laughed and shook his head. “No, I just wanted to get away from all the noise of the city. I like it out here better, where there’s more trees and birds and not so many people.”

“Me, too,” Tom said, looking up at the wide blue sky.

In this part of the town were larger and fancier houses surrounded by fences or walls. Through the wrought iron fences and above the brick walls, Tom could see orchards and gardens filled with colorful flowers, exotic-looking plants, and shaped shrubs. Servants walked along the brick paths, taking care of the vegetation.

Ben stopped and pointed to a bunch of birds that just startled from a tree inside a walled courtyard several yards ahead. “Notice those birds?”

Tom looked where Ben pointed and nodded.

“They only fly up like that if something startles them,” Ben said. “That’s important to frontiersmen, because that means there might be a person there or a wild animal, and that might mean danger.”

Tom’s mouth opened in amazement. “How did you ever get so smart, Ben?”

Ben smiled. “I listened when Uncle James came and visited us from the frontier.”

“I don’t remember.” Tom frowned.

Ben laughed. “That’s because you were too little. But that’s all right, because I’ll teach you everything.”

A woman and a girl a few years older than Tom appeared in the entrance of the courtyard that the birds were startled from. They were both wearing simple red dresses

with bonnets, and the woman was holding an empty basket, as if they had just delivered something.

Tom gasped. “Mother! Mary!” He took off running, and when he reached them, he hugged them both.

“How did you get here?” Tom asked. “I thought you were visiting Mrs. Williams?”

“We were,” Mary said, laughing as she straightened her bonnet. “She lives right there.” She pointed to the house in the courtyard they just left.

Tom scratched his head as his eyebrows came together. “But I don’t ever remember coming out here.”

“That’s probably because when we did, you were imagining yourself somewhere else,” Ben said, coming up beside Tom.

“Oh.” Tom’s shoulders slouched. “Did you know we’d see them?”

Ben nodded and smiled.

“So did you two just come to see us home?” His mother smiled as she smoothed her full skirts.

Tom grinned and shook his head. “No, Ben’s showing me how to be a good frontiersman.”

“Oh, that’s nice of him,” she said, smiling at Ben and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Ben’s a good teacher.”

Ben beamed back.

A clattering of wheels on the cobblestones and the jangle of harnesses drew the family’s attention back to the courtyard. A fancy closed black carriage emerged, driven by an elegantly dressed man. Just as the coach passed by the family, an elderly woman popped her head out of the window and told the driver to stop.

“You’re still here, Grace?” the woman in the carriage said, brushing back a few wisps of light-gray hair that had come loose from behind her lace cap. Then she noticed Tom and Ben and smiled. “Ah, hello, Ben and Tom.”

Ben tipped his head. “Hello, Mrs. Williams.”

Tom just stared at her. She was a somewhat plump woman wearing an expensive purple dress. But that wasn't why he stared. He just couldn't believe that she lived here. Tom remembered going once before with his mother when she visited her elderly friend from church, and yet he didn't remember coming this way.

Mrs. Williams laughed. "Well, you might as well ride with me and I'll take you back into town so you don't have to walk as far."

Mrs. Graham gratefully accepted and motioned for Mary to follow.

"Mother, can I stay with them?" Mary pleaded. "I want to be a frontiersman, too!"

"You can't be a frontiersman." Tom folded his arms.

"Why not?" Mary asked.

"Because it's a frontiers*man*!" Tom replied.

"That's true," Ben said, "but that doesn't mean she can't learn. These things are good for anyone living on the frontier."

That satisfied Tom, so Mary asked her mother again if she could go.

Mrs. Graham smiled and nodded. "Just be sure you don't stay out too late."

Ben assured her they'd all be back on time, so she and Mrs. Williams rode off together.

When they were gone, the children started walking down the street again in the opposite direction that the carriage had gone.

"Ben, how do you always know how to get home?" Tom asked.

Ben laughed. "I don't always know, but I guess I just know these streets so well. In time you will, too."

"Oh, all right."

There was a missing cobblestone in the street, which they all had to put a foot in as they passed.

"But there's another way to know," Ben said, "one that will help you on the frontier."

"What?"

“By knowing what direction you went,” Ben said. “If you went west, that means you go east to get home. If you went southeast, then you need to go northwest.”

“But how do you know which way is which?” Tom asked.

“It’s easy,” Ben said. “All you need is to be able to see the sun and know about what time it is. So the sun rises in the east in the morning. Then at noon it’s above our heads, but to the south, and then goes to the west at night. When you know which way the sun is pointing, you can figure out all the other directions. See?”

Tom smiled and nodded.

“So which direction are we going now?” Ben asked him.

Tom frowned as he tried to think. They were going away from the sun and it was late afternoon. So if the sun was now in the west, then that meant—

“East!” Tom cried.

Mary clapped. “You’ll be ready for the frontier in no time!”

Tom smiled.

“So what were you learning before Mother and I joined you?” Mary asked. “I don’t want to miss anything.”

“I was just telling Tom how he needs to be aware of his surroundings,” Ben told Mary. “How every movement is important.”

Mary nodded, then added, “And so are misplaced things, like a broken twig or a footprint.”

Ben nodded. “Uncle James is so good at reading the signs he knows what animals passed through just by looking in a bit of woods.”

“Wow!” Tom said, looking at his brother. “I want to be like that!”

Suddenly Tom tripped on an upturned cobblestone and fell. He wasn’t hurt, so he got back up quickly with Ben’s help.

“Then you need to watch where you’re going!” Ben grinned.

Tom hung his head. Ben had just been telling him how to watch where he was going and he still messed up.

“It’s okay, Tom,” Mary said, putting an arm around his shoulder. “You’ll get it with practice.”

Ben nodded. “It’s not like you can get this in one day. You should’ve seen how bad I was when Uncle James took me out one time.”

“What happened?” Mary asked.

“Well, we came to a stream that we could only cross on slippery stones,” Ben began. “Uncle James told me to watch how he crossed, like on what stones would be good. I did for a bit, but then this squirrel caught my eye, and I forgot about watching Uncle James. He turned back to see how I was doing and saw that I was watching the squirrel. I suddenly remembered I was supposed to follow him, but instead of asking for his help again, I went over my own way. Uncle James didn’t stop me, probably thinking that it’d teach me a lesson.”

“Did you make it across?” Tom asked.

“Yes,” Ben answered. “But not without first dunking myself in the water! One of those stones was too slippery and I couldn’t stay on it. Uncle James had a good laugh.”

“Poor you!” Mary said.

“Naw, it wasn’t too bad. Besides, it served me right. Now come on and let’s find another lesson.”

Ben turned into the shadowy alley between the walls of two different courtyards. With the trees overhead and the high brick walls on either side, the light was dimmer than on the road, making it hard to see far into the passage. Tom could just make out the shape of some large objects, perhaps the remains of a barrel or box or maybe just a pile of leaves and sticks.

“Let’s practice noticing our surroundings in here,” Ben said. “What do you see, Tom?”

Tom stepped onto the dirt ground of the alley as he turned his head this way and that. “There’s lots of dirt, leaves, and sticks.”

“Is there anything else, anything unusual?” Ben asked, looking at Tom.

Tom pointed on the ground. “There’s some eggshell.”

Ben nodded approvingly. “What’s around it?”

Tom bent down to have a closer look. “It looks like bits of food scraps and”—he sniffed and wrinkled his nose—“and manure.”

“That’s pig manure,” Ben said, coming up behind Tom to look.

“Eww, why do you even know that?” Mary asked, wrinkling her nose like Tom.

“It’s useful,” Ben replied. “Every type of animal has a different kind, so you know what kind of animal has been around. If it’s deer, then it helps with hunting. If it’s wolf, then you know to be careful.”

“I guess,” Mary said. “It still seems disgusting that you’d want to look at it.”

Ben just smiled. “I could tell you more disgusting things frontiersmen do, but I won’t.”

“Thank you,” Mary said and then paused. “Maybe I don’t want to be a frontiersman.”

“You can’t, remember?” Tom said.

Mary rolled her eyes.

“So what else do you notice, Tom?” Ben asked. “It doesn’t have to be things on the ground—it can be anything.”

Tom stood up and continued surveying the ground. “Well, there’s a piece of broken brick here.” His gaze followed up the side of the brick wall. “It looks like it came from there.” He pointed a little ways above his head.

“Good job, Tom!” Ben said.

“How do you think it broke off? When someone threw a rock?” Mary wondered.

“That’s a good guess.” Ben shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Mary cocked her head. “I wonder if Uncle James would know.”

“I’m sure he’d be able to figure out more than us!” Ben said.

“Like who threw the rock!” Tom added.

Ben and Mary laughed. “I don’t know about that,” Ben said.

Tom smiled and walked farther into the alley, deeper into the shadows and closer to the large objects with the outlines he saw when he first came in. “Eww! More manure!”

Ben started toward him. "Is it the same?"

"No, it looks different."

Suddenly a growl rumbled beside Tom and a mangy dog with matted, muddy fur jumped out of the shadows. Its teeth were bared, ready to fight.

Tom gasped. He wanted to escape, but his legs wouldn't run. All he could see or think about was the dog. But then a voice broke into his thoughts.

"Just ease your way back, Tom." It was Ben. Tom knew Ben wouldn't let him get hurt.

"He doesn't want to hurt you—he's just scared, like you," Ben said softly.

Tom tried to focus on his brother's voice and do what he said, but he just couldn't. Nothing would move. He couldn't even take a breath, staring into the snarling face of the wild dog.

"Come on, Tom," Ben whispered encouragingly. "There's no need to be scared. You're safe if you just come back to me."

The dog growled again but otherwise didn't move, and neither did Tom.

"Tom, it's okay. You can do this. You can overcome your fear," Ben said. "I believe in you."

Tom believed anything Ben said was true, and if he believed that he could do it, then he could. So Tom rallied all his strength, gritted his teeth, and slowly stepped back.

"That's it, Tom!" Ben said as quietly as he could. "Just a few more steps."

Again Tom took a step back and again Ben praised him. All the time Tom moved back, he looked at the dog and thought about how Ben had said it was scared. Tom could almost see the scared dog underneath the front of meanness, and as Tom continued setting one foot behind the other, he thought he could see relief on its face.

It only took a moment to get back to Ben and Mary, but to Tom it seemed like hours. When they all were together, they hurried out of the alley and back to the street. Tom looked over his shoulder at the dog as it watched them leave. He sighed, glad that the nightmare had turned out okay.

"That was too close!" Mary said as they continued along the street.

“Yes, but Tom did wonderfully!” Ben said and gave his brother a hug. Tom beamed up at him. Tom would do anything to win the approval of his older brother.

“Yes, you did well, Tom,” Mary said. “And now you know what to do if you meet a wild dog again.”

“Or a wolf, when you’re on the frontier,” Ben said.

They walked a bit farther on the quiet streets before turning to head home, and Tom basked in the glory of his accomplishment. He was well on his way to becoming a great little frontiersman.

The End