

CHASING DAWN:
ECHOES OF A
FORGOTTEN FIRE



But in a little while I see a pale streak over the treetops, and knowed the day was coming. So I took my gun and slipped off towards where I had run across that camp fire, stopping every minute or two to listen. But I hadn't no luck somehow; I couldn't seem to find the place. But by and by, sure enough, I caught a glimpse of fire away through the trees. I went for it, cautious and slow. By and by I was close enough to have a look, and there laid a man on the ground. It most give me the fan-tods. He had a blanket around his head, and his head was nearly in the fire.

I set there behind a clump of bushes, in about six foot of him, and kept my eyes on him steady. It was getting gray daylight now. Pretty soon he gapped and stretched himself and hove off the blanket, and it was! I bet I was glad to see him. I says: "Hello!" and skipped out. He bounced up and stared at me wild. Then he drops down on his knees, and puts his hands together and says: "Doan' hurt me—don't! I hain't ever done no harm to a ghos'. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for 'em. You go en git in de river agin, whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to Ole Jim, 'at 'uz awluz yo' fren'."

Well, I warn't long making him understand I warn't dead. I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome now. I told him I warn't afraid of him telling the people where I was. I talked along, but he only set there and looked at me; never said nothing. Then I says: "It's good daylight. Le's get breakfast. Make up your camp fire good." "What's de use er makin' up de camp fire to cook strawbries en sich truck? But you got a gun, hain't you? Den we kin git sumfn better den strawbries." "Strawberries and such truck," I says. "Is that what you live on?" "I couldn' git nuffn else," he says. "Why, how long you been on the island?" "I come heah de night arter you's killed." "What, all that time?" "Yes—indeedy." "And ain't you had nothing but that kind of rubbage to eat?" "No, sah—nuffn else."

“Well, you must be most starved, ain’t you?” “I reck’n I could eat a hoss. I think I could. How long you ben on de islan’?” “Since the night I got killed.” “No! W’y, what has you lived on? But you got a gun. Oh, yes, you got a gun. Dat’s good. Now you kill sumfn en I’ll make up de fire.” So we went over to where the canoe was, and while he built a fire in a grassy open place amongst the trees, I fetched meal and bacon and coffee, and coffeepot and frying-pan, and sugar and tin cups, and the nigger was set back considerable, because he reckoned it was all done with witchcraft.

I caught a good big catfish, too, and Jim cleaned him with his knife, and fried him. When breakfast was ready we lolled on the grass and eat it smoking hot. Jim laid it in with all his might, for he was most about starved. Then when we had got pretty well stuffed, we laid off and lazied. By and by Jim says: “But looky here, Huck, who wuz it dat ’uz killed in dat shanty ef it warn’t you?” Then I told him the whole thing, and he said it was smart. He said Tom Sawyer couldn’t get up no better plan than what I had. Then I says: “How do you come to be here, Jim, and how’d you get here?” He looked pretty uneasy, and didn’t say nothing for a minute. Then he says: “Maybe I better not tell.”

“Why,?” “Well, dey’s reasons. But you wouldn’t tell on me ef I uz to tell you, would you, Huck?” “Blamed if I would, .” “Well, I b’lieve you, Huck. I—I run off.” “!” “But mind, you said you wouldn’t tell—you know you said you wouldn’t tell, Huck.” “Well, I did. I said I wouldn’t, and I’ll stick to it. Honest injun, I will. People would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t a-going to tell, and I ain’t a-going back there, anyways. So, now, le’s know all about it.” “Well, you see, it ’uz dis way. Ole missus—dat’s Miss Watson—she pecks on me all de time, en treats me pooty rough, but she awluz said she wouldn’t sell me down to Orleans. But I noticed dey wuz a nigger trader roun’ de place considable lately, en I begin to git oneasy.

Well, one night I creeps to de do' pooty late, en de do' warn't quite shet, en I hear old missus tell de widder she gwyne to sell me down to Orleans, but she didn' want to, but she could git eight hund'd dollars for me, en it 'uz sich a big stack o' money she couldn' resis'. De widder she try to git her to say she wouldn' do it, but I never waited to hear de res'. I lit out mighty quick, I tell you. "I tuck out en shin down de hill, en 'spec to steal a skift 'long de sho' som'ers 'bove de town, but dey wuz people a-stirring yit, so I hid in de ole tumble-down cooper-shop on de bank to wait for everybody to go 'way.

Well, I wuz dah all night. Dey wuz somebody roun' all de time. 'Long 'bout six in de mawnin' skifts begin to go by, en 'bout eight er nine every skift dat went 'long wuz talkin' 'bout how yo' pap come over to de town en say you's killed. Dese las' skifts wuz full o' ladies en genlmen a-goin' over for to see de place. Sometimes dey'd pull up at de sho' en take a res' b'fo' dey started acrost, so by de talk I got to know all 'bout de killin'. I 'uz powerful sorry you's killed, Huck, but I ain't no mo' now.

"I laid dah under de shavin's all day. I 'uz hungry, but I warn't afeard; bekase I knowed ole missus en de widder wuz goin' to start to de camp-meet'n' right arter breakfas' en be gone all day, en dey knows I goes off wid de cattle 'bout daylight, so dey wouldn' 'spec to see me roun' de place, en so dey wouldn' miss me tell arter dark in de evenin'. De yuther servants wouldn' miss me, kase dey'd shin out en take holiday soon as de ole folks 'uz out'n de way.

"Well, when it come dark I tuck out up de river road, en went 'bout mile er more to whah dey warn't no houses. I'd made up my mine 'bout what I's agwyne to do. You see, ef I kep' on tryin' to git away afoot, de dogs 'ud track me; ef I stole a skift to cross over, dey'd miss dat skift, you see, en dey'd know 'bout whah I'd lan' on de yuther side, en whah to pick up my track. So I says, a raff is what I's arter; it doan' make no track.

"I see a light a-comin' roun' de p'int bymeby, so I wade' in en shove' a log ahead o' me en swum more'n half way acrost de river, en got in 'mongst de driftwood, en kep' my head down low, en kinder swum agin de current tell de raff come along. Den I swum to de stern uv it en tuck a-holt.

It clouded up en 'uz pooty dark for a little while. So I clumb up en laid down on de planks. De men 'uz all 'way yonder in de middle, whah de lantern wuz. De river wuz a-risin', en dey wuz a good current; so I reck'n'd 'at by fo' in de mawnin' I'd be mile down de river, en den I'd slip in jis b'fo' daylight en swim asho', en take to de woods on de Illinois side. "But I didn' have no luck. When we 'uz mos' down to de head er de islan' a man begin to come aft wid de lantern, I see it warn't no use fer to wait, so I slid overboard en struck out fer de islan'.

Well, I had a notion I could lan' mos' anywhers, but I couldn't—bank too bluff. I 'uz mos' to de foot er de islan' b'fo' I found' a good place. I went into de woods en jedged I wouldn' fool wid raffs no mo', long as dey move de lantern roun' so. I had my pipe en a plug er dogleg, en some matches in my cap, en dey warn't wet, so I 'uz all right." "And so you ain't had no meat nor bread to eat all this time? Why didn't you get mud-turkles?" "How you gwyne to git 'm? You can't slip up on um en grab um; en how's a body gwyne to hit um wid a rock? How could a body do it in de night? En I warn't gwyne to show mysef on de bank in de daytime." "Well, that's so. You've had to keep in the woods all the time, of course. Did you hear 'em shooting the cannon?" "Oh, yes. I knowed dey was arter you.

I see um go by heah—watched um thoo de bushes.” Some young birds come along, flying a yard or two at a time and lighting. Jim said it was a sign it was going to rain. He said it was a sign when young chickens flew that way, and so he reckoned it was the same way when young birds done it. I was going to catch some of them, but Jim wouldn’t let me. He said it was death. He said his father laid mighty sick once, and some of them caught a bird, and his old granny said his father would die, and he did.

And said you mustn’t count the things you are going to cook for dinner, because that would bring bad luck. The same if you shook the table-cloth after sundown. And he said if a man owned a beehive and that man died, the bees must be told about it before sun-up next morning, or else the bees would all weaken down and quit work and die. said bees wouldn’t sting idiots; but I didn’t believe that, because I had tried them lots of times myself, and they wouldn’t sting me.

I had heard about some of these things before, but not all of them. knowed all kinds of signs. He said he knowed most everything. I said it looked to me like all the signs was about bad luck, and so I asked him if there warn’t any good-luck signs. He says: “Mighty few—an’ dey ain’t no use to a body. What you want to know whengood luck’s a-comin’ for? Want to keep it off?” And he said: “Ef you’s got hairy arms en a hairy breas’, it’s a sign dat you’s agwyne to be rich. Well, dey’s some use in a sign like dat, ’kase it’s so fur ahead. You see, maybe you’s got to be po’ a long time fust, en so you might git discourage’ en kill yo’sef ’f you didn’ know by de sign dat you gwyne to be rich bymeby.”

“Have you got hairy arms and a hairy breast. “What’s de use to ax dat question? Don’t you see I has?” “Well, are you rich?” “No, but I ben rich wunst, and gwyne to be rich agin. Wunst I had foteen dollars, but I tuck to specalat’n’, en got busted out.” “What did you speculate in, ?” “Well, fust I tackled stock.” “What kind of stock?” “Why, live stock—cattle, you know. I put ten dollars in a cow. But I ain’ gwyne to resk no mo’ money in stock. De cow up ’n’ died on my han’s.” “So you lost the ten dollars.” “No, I didn’t lose it all. I on’y los’ ’bout nine of it. I sole de hide en taller for a dollar en ten cents.”

“You had left. Did you speculate any more?” “Yes. You know that one-laigged nigger dat b’longs to old ? Well, he sot up a bank, en say anybody dat put in a dollar would git fo’ dollars mo’ at de en’ er de year. Well, all de niggers went in, but dey didn’t have much. I wuz de on’y one dat had much. So I stuck out for mo’ dan fo’ dollars, en I said ‘f I didn’ git it I’d start a bank mysef. Well, o’ course dat nigger want’ to keep me out er de business, bekase he says dey warn’t business ’nough for two banks, so he say I could put in my five dollars en he pay me thirty-five at de en’ er de year.

“So I done it. Den I reck’n’d I’d inves’ de dollars right off en keep things a-movin’. Dey wuz a nigger name’ Bob, dat had ketched a wood-flat, en his marster didn’ know it; en I bought it off’n him en told him to take de thirtyfive dollars when de en’ er de year come; but somebody stole de wood-flat dat night, en nex day de one-laigged nigger say de bank’s busted. So dey didn’ none uv us git no money.” “What did you do with the ten cents, ” “Well, I ’uz gwyne to spen’ it, but I had a dream, en de dream tole me to give it to a nigger name’ Balum—Balum’s Ass dey call him for short; he’s one er dem chuckleheads, you know. But he’s lucky, dey say, en I see I warn’t lucky.

De dream say let Balum inves’ de ten cents en he’d make a raise for me. Well, Balum he tuck de money, en when he wuz in church he hear de preacher say dat whoever give to de po’ len’ to de Lord, en boun’ to git his money back a hund’d times.

So Balum he tuck en give de ten cents to de po', en laid low to see what wuz gwyne to come of it." "Well, what did come of it," "Nuffn never come of it. I couldn' manage to k'leck dat money no way; en Balum he couldn'. I ain' gwyne to len' no mo' money 'dout I see de security. Boun' to git yo' money back a hund'd times, de preacher says! Ef I could git de ten cents back, I'd call it squah, en be glad er de chanst." "Well, it's all right anyway, Jim, long as you're going to be rich again some time or other."

So Balum he tuck en give de ten cents to de po', en laid low to see what wuz gwyne to come of it." "Well, what did come of it," "Nuffn never come of it. I couldn' manage to k'leck dat money no way; en Balum he couldn'. I ain' gwyne to len' no mo' money 'dout I see de security. Boun' to git yo' money back a hund'd times, de preacher says! Ef I could git de ten cents back, I'd call it squah, en be glad er de chanst." "Well, it's all right anyway, long as you're going to be rich again some time or other." "Yes; en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns mysef, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn' want no mo'."

I wanted to go and look at a place right about the middle of the island that I'd found when I was exploring; so we started and soon got to it, because the island was only three miles long and a quarter of a mile wide. This place was a tolerable long, steep hill or ridge about forty foot high. We had a rough time getting to the top, the sides was so steep and the bushes so thick.

We tramped and clumb around all over it, and by and by found a good big cavern in the rock, most up to the top on the side towards Illinois. The cavern was as big as rooms bunched together, and could stand up straight in it. It was cool in there. was for putting our traps in there right away, but I said we didn't want to be climbing up and down there all the time.

said if we had the canoe hid in a good place, and had all the traps in the cavern, we could rush there if anybody was to come to the island, and they would never find us without dogs. And, besides, he said them little birds had said it was going to rain, and did I want the things to get wet? So we went back and got the canoe, and paddled up abreast the cavern, and lugged all the traps up there. Then we hunted up a place close by to hide the canoe in, amongst the thick willows.

We took some fish off of the lines and set them again, and begun to get ready for dinner. The door of the cavern was big enough to roll a hogshead in, and on one side of the door the floor stuck out a little bit, and was flat and a good place to build a fire on. So we built it there and cooked dinner. We spread the blankets inside for a carpet, and eat our dinner in there. We put all the other things handy at the back of the cavern. Pretty soon it darkened up, and begun to thunder and lighten; so the birds was right about it. Directly it begun to rain, and it rained like all fury, too, and I never see the wind blow so.

It was one of these regular summer storms. It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; and the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spider-webby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest—

FST! it was as bright as glory, and you'd have a little glimpse of tree-tops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm, hundreds of yards further than you could see before; dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful crash, and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling, down the sky towards the under side of the world, like rolling empty barrels down stairs—where it's long stairs and they bounce a good deal, you know.

, this is nice," I says. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread." "Well, you wouldn't a ben here 'f it hadn't a ben for . You'd a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittin' mos' drownded, too; dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it's gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile." The river went on raising and raising for days, till at last it was over the banks.

The water was three or four foot deep on the island in the low places and on the Illinois bottom. On that side it was a good many miles wide, but on the side it was the same old distance across—a half a mile—because the Missouri shore was just a wall of high bluffs. Daytimes we paddled all over the island in the canoe, It was mighty cool and shady in the deep woods, even if the sun was blazing outside. We went winding in and out amongst the trees, and sometimes the vines hung so thick we had to back away and go some other way.

Well, on every old broken-down tree you could see rabbits and snakes and such things; and when the island had been overflowed a day or two they got so tame, on account of being hungry, that you could paddle right up and put your hand on them if you wanted to; but not the snakes and turtles—they would slide off in the water. The ridge our cavern was in was full of them. We could a had pets enough if we'd wanted them. One night we caught a little section of a lumber raft—nice pine planks. It was foot wide and about foot long, and the top stood above water inches—a solid, level floor.

We could see saw-logs go by in the daylight sometimes, but we let them go; we didn't show ourselves in daylight. Another night when we was up at the head of the island, just before daylight, here comes a frame-house down, on the west side. She was a two-story, and tilted over considerable.

We paddled out and got aboard—clumb in at an upstairs window. But it was too dark to see yet, so we made the canoe fast and set in her to wait for daylight. The light begun to come before we got to the foot of the island. Then we looked in at the window. We could make out a bed, and a table, and two old chairs, and lots of things around about on the floor, and there was clothes hanging against the wall. There was something laying on the floor in the far corner that looked like a man. So says: "Hello, you!" But it didn't budge.

went, and bent down and looked, and says: "It's a dead man. Yes, indeedy; naked, too. He's ben shot in de back. I reck'n he's ben dead days. Come in, Huck, but doan' look at his face—it's too gashly I didn't look at him at all. threw some old rags over him, but he needn't done it; I didn't want to see him. There was heaps of old greasy cards scattered around over the floor, and old whisky bottles, and a couple of masks made out of black cloth; and all over the walls was the ignorantest kind of words and pictures made with charcoal.

There was old dirty calico dresses, and a sun-bonnet, and some women's underclothes hanging against the wall, and some men's clothing, too. We put the lot into the canoe—it might come good. There was a boy's old speckled straw hat on the floor; I took that, too. And there was a bottle that had had milk in it, and it had a rag stopper for a baby to suck. We would a took the bottle, but it was broke. There was a seedy old chest, and an old hair trunk with the hinges broke. They stood open, but there warn't nothing left in them that was any account. The way things was scattered about we reckoned the people left in a hurry, and warn't fixed so as to carry off most of their stuff.

We got an old tin lantern, and a butcher-knife without any handle, and a brannew Barlow knife worth bits in any store, and a lot of tallow candles, and a tin candlestick, and a gourd, and a tin cup, and a ratty old bedquilt off the bed, and a reticule with needles and pins and beeswax and buttons and thread and all such truck in it, and a hatchet and some nails, and a fishline as thick as my little finger with some monstrous hooks on it, and a roll of buckskin, and a leather dog-collar, and a horseshoe, and some vials of medicine that didn't have no label on them; and just as we was leaving I found a tolerable good curry-comb, and he found a ratty old fiddle-bow, and a wooden leg. The straps was broke off of it, but, barring that, it was a good enough leg, though it was too long for me and not long enough for , and we couldn't find the other one, though we hunted all around.