

CHAPTER 1

Home in Kentucky

Pioneer blood coursed through Eli Dunlap's veins, and the spirit of adventure obsessed him. Seventeen years had passed since he and his young bride Molly had settled in the wilds of Kentucky. Their equipment for housekeeping and farming had been meager. They had brought it all in a covered wagon drawn by a yoke of oxen. He remembered the day they had arrived.

"It will be tough going for a while, Molly," he said, as they unyoked the oxen. "It's a shame for me to bring a young thing like you into such a wilderness. But I'll venture to say that before many summers have passed we'll both be glad we pioneered."

"Don't be making apologies, Eli," Molly returned. "It's really too late for that now. Anyway, I love these Kentucky hills just as much as you do. See that lovely garden spot over there? You'll soon have it plowed, and I'll plant these seeds mother gave us. I'll help you plant the corn and potatoes; then I'll help you build the house right here on this spot. We'll build a stable, too, and after the crops are harvested this fall we'll make a trip back home and bring the cow and barnyard fowls mother gave us." Molly was filled with enthusiasm.

"Molly, your blood runs true blue. I withdraw all apologies," Eli declared.

Thus the Dunlaps had established their home in Kentucky. Buildings, crude, to be sure, were erected; land was cleared and planted; livestock increased; and the Dunlaps became prosperous farmers. Last and most important was the family of seven children. "Stairsteps," father Dunlap called them. Jack, sixteen, was now father's right-hand man. Bradley, fourteen, was a close second. Susan and Sally were twelve and ten, Benny was eight, and Matilda and Jimmy were six and four.

"Molly, have you noticed the northward trend lately? Scarcely a day comes and goes without some travelers passing, all headed north across the Ohio River. I hear there are fertile valleys, rolling hills, timberlands - "

"Eli Dunlap, are your feet itching?" interrupted Molly.

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“I fear they are, my dear. Some new adventure into rough country will be good for the children. Of course, not in the same way you and I pioneered here - “

“I hope not,” interrupted Molly again.

“No, Molly, we couldn’t go into the wilds of Ohio without first having some place to go.”

“You’ve always planned carefully, Eli. What do you have up your sleeve now?”

“Well, Molly, harvest is over, and the fall work is done. There should be several weeks before cold weather comes. Jack and I could go into the Ohio country and stake out a claim and build a house.”

“What kind of house can you two build in so short a time?” Molly asked skeptically.

“We couldn’t really finish a house, Molly; but we could get one started and maybe a roof over it for shelter. That would give us a place to move into next spring in time to plant our crops in Ohio. Doesn’t that sound thrilling? I still remember how courageous you were seventeen years ago.”

“Your plan isn’t so bad. This house has long since been too small to accommodate our family. I’ve been planning to suggest that we either build a new house or else add on to this one. If you prefer to build the new house in Ohio, I have no objection, especially since we were offered such a liberal price for this place.”

So it came about that father Dunlap and Jack went to Ohio to stake out a claim and build a house.

“Be sure to make the house plenty large,” Molly had called as they drove away.

The next few weeks seemed long to the family at home; but to father and Jack they were all too short. Ominous signs of the onset of winter caused them to return sooner than they wished, but the house was “livable,” they said.

Jack had thrilling tales to tell of the new country, but the story that interested everyone most was of the one near neighbor they would have - Red Feather, the Indian, who had a hut down by the creek.

The children could hardly wait for winter to pass. But spring arrived at last, and everything was ready for the move. Two covered wagons were packed full. A milch cow was tied behind each one; for mother insisted the family must have plenty of milk.

As father Dunlap and the older boys were completing preparations for an early start the next morning, mother stepped into the yard.

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“Father, there must be some place we can put Tiger,” she ventured rather timidly, for this was not the first time she had spoken to him on this subject.

“That cat again!” ejaculated father. He was firm, but not unkind. “I say, mother, there isn’t one inch of room in either wagon. With all the food and household furniture and farm implements, to say nothing of the nine of us who have to pack in on top, where can there be room for a cat?”

“But, father, if you would take one look at those tear-stained faces, and hear those baby pleas - well, I know there must be some way for Tiger to go. All I can hear is: ‘Take kitty, mamma; take kitty.’ Right now they are kneeling in the corner asking God to make a way for their kitty to go.”

“I give up. If anyone can figure out a place for him, I suppose he’ll have to go. But I don’t know where we can put him,” answered father.

“Shucks, dad, let the kids take their cat. He’s the only pet they have. I know where we can put him. I’ll make a little cage for him and fasten it underneath the chicken coop on the back of the wagon.” Big brother Jack was speaking. He did not often argue with his father, but now that father had asked for a suggestion, why shouldn’t he speak up? Besides, hadn’t he already passed his sixteenth summer, hadn’t he worked beside his dad in the fields for several years, and hadn’t he gone with his dad into the Ohio territory last fall to help stake out a homestead and build a house?

Father Dunlap looked Jack straight in the eye. “Son,” he began in a firm but kind tone, “you and I have done a lot of things together, but it has always been my head that has done the planning. Now when I am stumped, you have come to the rescue, and your suggestion is not a bad one. You make the cage and I’ll help you fasten it onto the wagon.”

At that moment two small children toddled out into the yard. “Tiger’s going with us, mother,” announced Matilda, ” ‘cause Jimmy and I asked Jesus to find a place for him.’

“Yes, Tiger is going,” said father, as he gave each child a kiss.