

Chapter 2 The Trail

A curious strength seemed to have come to the man. With almost steady hands he took down the photographs and the *Cowper Madonna*, packing them neatly away in a box to be left. From beneath his bunk he dragged a large, dusty traveling-bag, and in this he stowed a little food, a few garments, and a great deal of the music scattered about the room.

David, in the doorway, stared in dazed wonder. Gradually into his eyes crept a look never seen there before. "Father, where are we going?" he asked at last in a shaking voice, as he came slowly into the room.

"Back, Son. We're going back."

"To the village, where we get our eggs and bacon?"

"No, no, lad, not there. The other way. We're going down into the valley this time."

"The valley – *my* valley, with the Silver Lake?"

"Yes, my son, and beyond – far beyond." The man spoke dreamily. He was looking at a photograph in his hand. It had slipped in among the loose sheets of music and had not been put away with the others. It was the likeness of a beautiful woman.

For a moment David eyed him uncertainly; then he spoke. "Daddy, who is that? Who are all the people in these pictures? You've never told me about any of them except the little round one that you wear in your pocket. Who are they?"

Instead of answering, the man turned faraway eyes on the boy and smiled wistfully. "Ah, David, lad, how they'll love you! How they will love you! But you mustn't let them spoil you, Son. You must remember – remember all I've told you."

Once again David asked his question, but this time the man only turned back to the photograph, muttering something the boy could not understand. So after that, David did not

question any more. He was too amazed, too distressed. He had never before seen his father like this. With nervous haste the man was setting the little room to rights, crowding things into the bag and packing other things away in an old trunk. His cheeks were very red and his eyes very bright. He talked, too, almost constantly, though David could understand scarcely a word of what was said.

Later, the man caught up his violin and played; and never before had David heard his father play like that. The boy's eyes filled, and his heart ached with a pain that choked and numbed – though why, David could not have told. Still later, the man dropped his violin and sank exhausted into a chair; and then David, worn and frightened with it all, crept to his bunk and fell asleep.

In the gray dawn of the morning, David awoke to a different world. His father, pale-faced and gentle, was calling him to get ready for breakfast. The little room, dismantled of its decorations, was bare and cold. The bag, closed and strapped, rested on the floor by the door, together with the two violins in their cases, ready to carry.

"We must hurry, Son. It's a long tramp before we take the cars."

"The cars – the real cars? Do we go in those?" David was fully awake now.

"Yes."

"And is that all we're to carry?"

"Yes. Hurry, Son."

"But we'll come back – sometime?"

There was no answer.

"Father, we're coming back *sometime*?" David's voice was insistent now.

The man stooped and tightened a strap that was already quite tight enough. Then he laughed lightly. "Why, of course you're coming back sometime, David. Only think of all these

things we're leaving!"

When the last dish was put away, the last garment adjusted, and the last look given to the little room, the travelers picked up the bag and the violins and went out into the sweet freshness of the morning. As he fastened the door, the man sighed profoundly; but David did not notice this. His face was turned toward the east – always David looked toward the sun. "Daddy, let's not go after all! Let's stay here," he cried ardently, drinking in the beauty of the morning.

"We must go, David. Come on, Son." And the man led the way across the green slope to the west.

It was a scarcely perceptible trail, but the man found it and followed it with evident confidence. There was only the pause now and then to steady his none-too-sure step, or to ease the burden of the bag. Very soon the forest lay all about them with the birds singing over their heads and with numberless tiny feet scurrying through the underbrush on all sides. Just out of sight a brook babbled noisily of its delight in being alive; and away up in the treetops the morning sun played hide-and-seek among the dancing leaves.

And David leaped, and laughed, and loved it all, nor was any of it strange to him. The birds, the trees, the sun, the brook, the scurrying little creatures of the forest, all were friends of his. But the man – the man did not leap or laugh, though he, too, loved it all. The man was becoming afraid.

He knew now that he had undertaken more than he could carry out. Step by step the bag had grown heavier, and hour by hour the insistent, teasing pain in his side had increased until it was a torture. He had forgotten that the way to the valley was so long; he had not realized how nearly spent was his strength before he even started down the trail. Throbbing through his brain was the question, what if, after all, he could not – but even to himself he would not say the words.

At noon they paused for luncheon, and at night they

camped where the chattering brook had stopped to rest in a still, black pool. The next morning the man and the boy picked up the trail again, but without the bag.

Under some leaves in a little hollow, the man had hidden the bag, and had then said, as if casually: "I believe, after all, I won't carry this along. There's nothing in it that we really need, you know, now that I've taken out the luncheon box, and by night we'll be down in the valley."

"Of course!" laughed David. "We don't need that." And he laughed again, for pure joy. Little use had David for bags or baggage!

They were more than halfway down the mountain now, and soon they reached a grass-grown road, little traveled, but yet a road. Still later they came to where four ways crossed, and two of them bore the marks of many wheels. By sundown the little brook at their side murmured softly of quiet fields and meadows, and David knew that the valley was reached.

David was not laughing now. He was watching his father with startled eyes. David had not known what anxiety was, but he was finding out now – though he but vaguely realized that something was not right. For some time his father had said but little, and that little had been in a voice that was thick and unnatural-sounding. He was walking fast, yet David noticed that every step seemed an effort, that every breath came in short gasps. His eyes were very bright and were fixedly bent on the road ahead, as if even the haste he was making was not haste enough. Twice David spoke to him, but he did not answer; and the boy could only trudge along on his weary little feet and sigh for the dear home on the mountain-top which they had left behind them the morning before.

They met few fellow travelers, and those they did meet paid scant attention to the man and the boy carrying the violins. As it happened, there was no one in sight when the man, walking in the grass at the side of the road, stumbled and

fell heavily to the ground.

David sprang quickly forward. "Father, what is it? *What is it?*"

There was no answer.

"Daddy, why don't you speak to me? See, it's David!"

With a painful effort the man roused himself and sat up. For a moment he gazed dully into the boy's face; then a half-forgotten something seemed to stir him into feverish action. With shaking fingers he handed David his watch and a small ivory miniature. Then he searched his pockets until on the ground before him lay a shining pile of gold pieces – to David it seemed there must be a hundred of them.

"Take them – hide them – keep them, David – until you – need them," panted the man. "Then go – go on. I can't."

"Alone? Without you?" demurred the boy, aghast. "Why, Father, I couldn't! I don't know the way. Besides, I'd rather stay with you," he added soothingly, as he slipped the watch and the miniature into his pocket; "then we can both go." And he dropped himself down at his father's side.

The man shook his head feebly and pointed again to the gold pieces. "Take them, David – hide them," he chattered with pale lips.

Distraught, the boy began picking up the money and tucking it into his pockets. "There, Father. I've done it. And you know I'm not going anywhere without you," he declared stoutly.

Just as the last bit of gold slipped out of sight, a horse and wagon rattled around the turn of the road above. The driver of the horse glanced disapprovingly at the man and the boy by the roadside; but he did not stop. After he had passed, the boy turned again to his father. The man was fumbling once more in his pockets. This time from his coat he produced a pencil and a small notebook from which he tore a page and began to write, laboriously, painfully.

David sighed and looked about him. He was tired and hungry, and he did not understand things at all. Something very wrong, very terrible, must be the matter with his father. Here it was almost dark, yet they had no place to go, no supper to eat, while far, far up on the mountainside was their own dear home sad and lonely without them. Up there, too, the sun still shone, doubtless – at least there were the rose-glow and the Silver Lake to look at – while down here there was nothing, nothing but gray shadows, a long dreary road, and a straggling house or two in sight. From above, the valley might look to be a wonderland, but in reality it was nothing but a dismal waste of gloom, decided David.

David's father had torn a second page from his book and was beginning another note, when the boy suddenly jumped to his feet. One of the straggling houses was near the road where they sat, and its presence had given David an idea. With swift steps he hurried to the front door and knocked upon it. In answer a tall, unsmiling woman appeared and said, "Well?"

David removed his cap as his father had taught him to do when one of the mountain women spoke to him. "Good evening, Lady; I'm David," he began frankly. "My father is so tired he fell down back there, and we should like very much to stay with you all night, if you don't mind."

The woman in the doorway stared. For a moment she was mute with amazement. Her eyes swept the plain, rather rough garments of the boy, then sought the half-recumbent figure of the man by the roadside. Her chin came up angrily. "Oh, would you, indeed! Well!" she scouted, "Humph! We don't accommodate tramps, little boy." And she shut the door hard.

It was David's turn to stare. Just what a tramp might be, he did not know; but never before had a request of his been so angrily refused, he knew that. A fierce something rose within him – a fierce new something that sent the swift red to

his neck and brow. He raised a determined hand to the doorknob – he had something to say to that woman! – when the door suddenly opened again from the inside.

"See here, boy," began the woman, looking out at him a little less unkindly, "if you're hungry, I'll give you some milk and bread. Go around to the back porch and I'll get it for you." And she shut the door again.

David's hand dropped to his side. The red still stayed on his face and neck, however, and that fierce new something within him bade him refuse to take food from this woman... but there was his father – his poor father, who was so tired, and there was his own stomach clamoring to be fed. No, he could not refuse. And with slow steps and hanging head David went around the corner of the house to the rear.

As the half-loaf of bread and the pail of milk were placed in his hands, David remembered suddenly that in the village store on the mountain, his father paid money for his food. David was glad, now, that he had those gold pieces in his pocket, for he could pay money. Instantly his head came up. He straightened with self-respect, shifted his burdens to one hand, and thrust the other into his pocket.

A moment later he presented on his outstretched palm a shining disk of gold. "Will you take this, to pay, please, for the bread and milk?" he asked proudly.

The woman began to shake her head; but, as her eyes fell on the money, she started and bent closer to examine it. The next instant she jerked herself upright with an angry exclamation. "It's gold! A ten-dollar gold piece! So you're a thief, too, are you, as well as a tramp? Humph! Well, I guess you don't need this then," she finished sharply, snatching the bread and the pail of milk from the boy's hand.

The next moment David stood alone on the doorstep, with the sound of a quickly thrown bolt in his ears. A thief! David had spent little time with thieves, but he knew what they were.

Only a month before a man had tried to steal the violins from the cabin; and he was a thief, the milk-boy said. David flushed now again, angrily, as he faced the closed door. But he did not tarry. He turned and ran to his father. "Father, come away, quick! You must come away," he choked.

So urgent was the boy's voice that almost unconsciously the sick man got to his feet. With shaking hands he thrust the notes he had been writing into his pocket. The little book, from which he had torn the leaves for this purpose, had already dropped unheeded into the grass at his feet. "Yes, Son, yes, we'll go," mumbled the man. "I feel better now. I can – walk."

And he did walk, though very slowly, ten, a dozen, twenty steps. From behind came the sound of wheels that stopped close beside them.

"Hullo, there! Going to the village?" called a voice.

"Yes, Sir." David's answer was unhesitating. Where "the village" was, he did not know; he knew only that it must be somewhere away from the woman who had called him a thief. And that was all he cared to know.

"I'm going 'most there myself. Want a lift?" asked the man, still kindly.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you!" cried the boy joyfully, and together they aided his father to climb into the roomy wagon-body.

There were few words said. The man at the reins drove rapidly and paid little attention to anything but his horses. The sick man dozed and rested. The boy sat, wistful-eyed and silent, watching the trees and houses flit by. The sun had long ago set, but it was not dark, for the moon was round and bright, and the sky was cloudless.

Where the road forked sharply the man drew his horses to a stop. "Well, I'm sorry, but I guess I'll have to drop you here, friends. I turn off to the right; but it's not more 'n a quarter of

a mile for you, now" he finished cheerily, pointing with his whip to a cluster of twinkling lights.

"Thank you, Sir, thank you," breathed David gratefully, steadying his father's steps. "You've helped us lots. Thank you!"

In David's heart was a wild desire to lay at this good man's feet all of his shining gold pieces as payment for this timely aid, but caution held him back: it seemed that only in stores did money pay; outside, it branded one a thief!

Alone with his father, David faced once more his problem. Where should they go for the night? Plainly his father could not walk far. He had begun to talk again, too – low, half-finished sentences that David could not understand and that vaguely troubled him. There was a house nearby, and several others down the road toward the village; but David had had all the experience he wanted that night with strange houses and strange women. There was a barn, a big one, which was nearest of all; and it was toward this barn that David finally turned his father's steps.

"We'll go there, Daddy, if we can get in," he proposed softly. "And, we'll stay all night and rest."