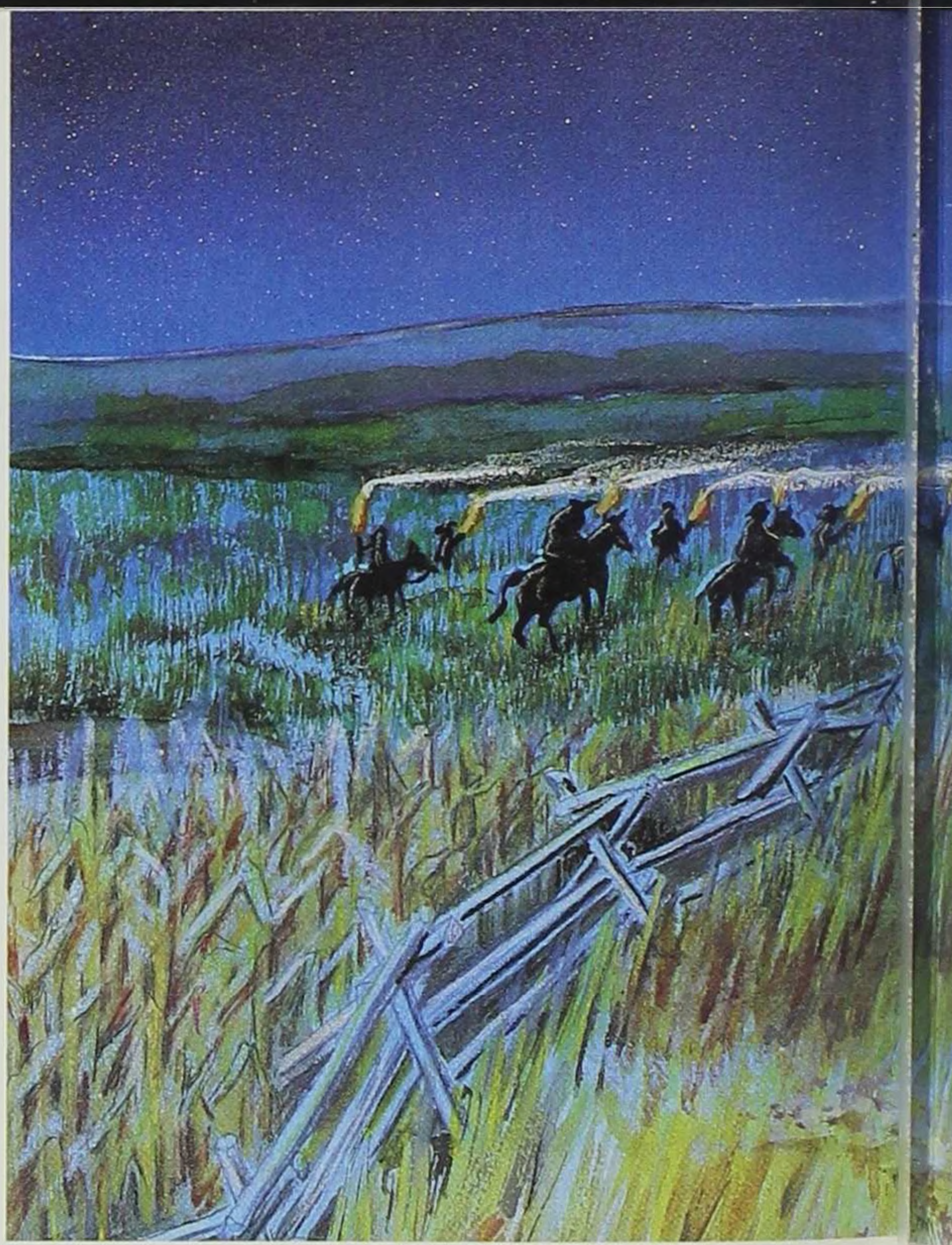


Trailing a Lost Child

by Dan De Quille

illustrated by Brenda Robinson

TO-DAY I SAW in a Pacific coast newspaper an account of a lost child. It brought freshly to my mind a search for a lost child in which I participated forty years ago. It was the only case of the kind with which I ever had anything to do. Children are often lost in large towns and cities, to the alarm and grief of their parents, but the straying of a child in a place thronged with people is not so serious a matter as is the wandering away of a little one into the boundless wilds of an unsettled country. The police are notified, advertisements inserted in the daily papers, and as some one is pretty sure to have found and taken care of the little waif, it is soon restored to the arms of its parents, except in the rare cases of kidnapping. In wild regions, however, when a child is known to be lost, it is necessary to at once organize searching parties and scour the country for miles in all directions. Nothing more quickly arouses the people of a settlement in one of our western wilds than the news that a child has been lost. The sympathy of even the most stolid in the community is awakened. In isolated settlements all are drawn together as a sort of class or large family, each member of which is familiarly acquainted with every other member, both great and small. This being the case, when a child is lost by one of the families of such a community, it is only necessary to mention its name to bring its image to the mind's eye of every one; besides,



there will be scores of persons who have fondled and dandled the missing little one, looked into its innocent eyes and listened to its pretty prattle.

My experience in hunting for a lost child was had in Iowa, in 1851. It was in what was known as the Wapse-noe-nock (White Earth Creek) settlement, half way between Muscatine and Iowa City. To the southward was a heavy body of timber, a mile or two in width and extending for thirty miles along the creek — the Wapse-noe-nock — while to the west and north lay the wild and boundless prairie.

One night, late in October, I was aroused by a cry of "Hello! Hello! The house!"

It was about ten o'clock at night. Springing out of bed I raised a window and sang out: "Hello!"

"A child is lost — William Henderson's little Lizzie. They missed her about sundown, and since then we have been searching everywhere. Come and bring all the help you can. I am going to carry the news to the other neighbors in this direction," and the man, a neighbor, whose voice I at once recognized, galloped on.

The farm of William Henderson was two



miles away, on the edge of the boundless prairie lying to the northward. My brothers and every man about the house turned out and began dressing, for all had heard the alarming news and all knew the lost child — a little four-year-old. Without waiting to go out upon the prairie to catch up horses, we all struck out on foot for the Henderson farm. When we arrived at Henderson's house, we found it filled with women. Mrs. Henderson was wild. She was determined to rush forth into the prairie, despite the darkness of the night. "The wolves! the wolves!" was her constant cry. "The wolves will kill my poor child!" Twenty women were present, and all nearly as frantic as the mother. The house was a perfect bedlam.

It was not without reason that the mind of the mother was filled with fear of wolves. At that time the prairies were full of coyotes, bands of which nightly prowled about the outlying farms, ready to slip in and carry off lambs or fowls. When intent upon such thieving they are quiet enough, but if balked by the flashing of lights or an unusual commotion, they stand off at a distance and yelp out their disappointment and anger. This evening the hungry brutes, owing to the stir about the farm, had

been particularly noisy and indignant. The howls and yelps were torture to the poor mother. Some boys had two or three times gone out into the prairie back of the fields with dogs, but the wolves were in such force that they each time turned and followed the dogs in as soon as the boys turned about. Whenever the wolves began yelping, the poor mother would make a rush for the door, but four or five women, who had resolved themselves into a sort of body-guard, always piled upon her and dragged her back. As the mother was an unusually large and strong woman, these struggles were so fierce as to frighten the fifteen or twenty youngsters collected at the house and set them all to screeching at the top of their voices.

After witnessing a skirmish or two of the kind mentioned, and being unable to obtain any useful information at the house, we beat a retreat. The men were all out in a stretch of prairie that lay east of the farm. Toward them we hastened. Before us was a beautiful sight. Not only all the farmers but all the residents of the little village of West Liberty had taken the field. About sixty men on horseback, each with a huge torch, were seen moving slowly in line

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across the prairie. The horsemen were about fifty feet apart, and between each pair was a footman. They swept over a wide swath, and when out a mile from the fields would turn, form again and move back again over new ground. In order not to trample the child under the feet of their horses, they did not move out of a walk. At the fields a number of old men were splitting up fence-rails and making torches. Thus they were going over the prairie nearest the house, almost foot by foot.

This unusual sight stirred up the impish coyotes, and they could be frequently heard yelping in the prairie to the northward of the farm, quite heedless of the gun and pistol shots when they raised their infernal howl.

The father of the lost child was among the mounted men. He was calm, but his face looked like that of a dead man in the glare of his torch. We had failed to obtain any useful information at the house, and when the father came to the fence where the torches were renewed, a cousin who was with me approached him. "Mr. Henderson," he said, "keep up your courage. Your child will be found; if not to-night, then surely very soon after daylight. What kind of shoes did she have on?"

"A pair of little buckskin moccasins," said the father.

"That is all I wanted to learn," said my cousin — "Take courage, Mr. Henderson."

My cousin then went to a man from the village who had a bulls-eye lantern, and borrowing it, started off alone in the direction of the house. This cousin — Milton Moore by name — had recently returned from the pineries of Wisconsin, where for three years he had been lumbering on the Chippewa river. He was a great hunter, and had been much among the Chippewa and the Winnebago Indians. In his hunting expeditions among the Indians and with their young braves he had become an expert in the art of trailing. I think few Indians could have beaten him.

When he left with his lantern, I asked no questions. I knew he was off on business; I also knew that he did not like questions. Although only twenty-four years of age, he had the gravity and stoicism of an Indian brave. A few years more among the red men would have fixed him in their ways for life. As it was, he did not get

the Indian out of him for about three years; he would every once in a while take his gun and slip away to join some roving band of Indian hunters, presently returning a painted brave and adorned in all the finery of a young red man, every stitch of his civilized dress swapped off for fringed and beaded buckskin, and many dollars given to boot.

In about an hour my cousin came back. A large bonfire of fence-rails had been made, near which I was standing. Seeing my cousin come into the edge of the circle of light thrown from the fire and make me a sign, I went out to him and we withdrew into the dark.

"Well, what news?" I asked.

"Bad, bad!" said he. "The child has gone into the hog-pen."

"Great God! You don't mean to say that she has been devoured by the hogs?"

"No; I hope not. I could find no fragments of her dress. But if she escaped the hogs, I fear she is drowned. At the side of the lot in which the hogs are penned is a slough-well about ten feet deep. I found the child's tracks in the lane leading from the house out to the prairie; the tracks turned and followed the fence of the field. Then she crawled through the fence and went toward the well inside the hog-pen, in a corner of the fence. There I lost the track. Don't let the father know. Take a lantern and half-a-dozen men; then quietly slip away, rig some kind of grappling-hooks and examine the well. If you don't find the body in the well, search every part of the lot for scraps of the child's dress. I shall go southward along the line of the field, and if she came out of that pen alive, I hope somewhere to again find the little moccasin-tracks."

Soundings showed the slough-well to contain only about four feet of water. I would wait for no grappling-hooks. Taking a rail from the fence for use as a ladder, I slipped off my clothes, and descended to the bottom of the well. It was a very cold bath, but I examined every inch of the well's bottom, and found nothing but a drowned pig. This relieved our minds of all thoughts of the well. While I was dressing, the men with me took the lantern and began searching the corral, a lot of half-an-acre containing about sixty half-wild hogs of some unrecognizable prairie breed. While looking



for shreds of clothing, the men were also to look for blood on the jaws of such of the hogs as were white-haired.

Stooping and groping up to my neck in water had so chilled me that I left the examination of the lot to the others, and bent my course toward the bonfires, a quarter-of-a-mile away to the southward. Just before reaching the fires I met my cousin. Said he: "All looks well again. The child came out of the hog-pen all right. I have found the prints of her moccasins in three

places in the dirt thrown out of gopher-holes. She is following the main line of fence southward among the cornfields of the different farms, crawling back and forth through the fence. I left her track in the cornfield of her Uncle John Lewis. What I want you to do is to call off the horsemen who are working southward over the prairie. I want nobody to go in that direction to obliterate the trail I am following. Make the father understand this. Tell him that, if left to myself, I will find his child. To

convince him that I know what I am about, give him these threads which I found in places where his little girl had crawled through the fence," and he gave me three or four bright woollen threads from a fringed hood worn by the child.

I went toward the half-dozen bonfires blazing on the edge of the prairie, while my cousin hurried away to the southward. It was now about one o'clock in the morning and so cold that groups of men were huddled about all the fires. The horsemen soon came in when I announced the news of the tracks of the child having been found far to the southward of the hog-pen.

"The hog-pen!" cried the father. He had been kept in ignorance of the child having been trailed into the corral. When fully informed of what has been related above, the father cried out: "Thank God that she passed there in safety!" Soon, however, he said: "But are you sure her tracks have been found beyond the hog-lot?"

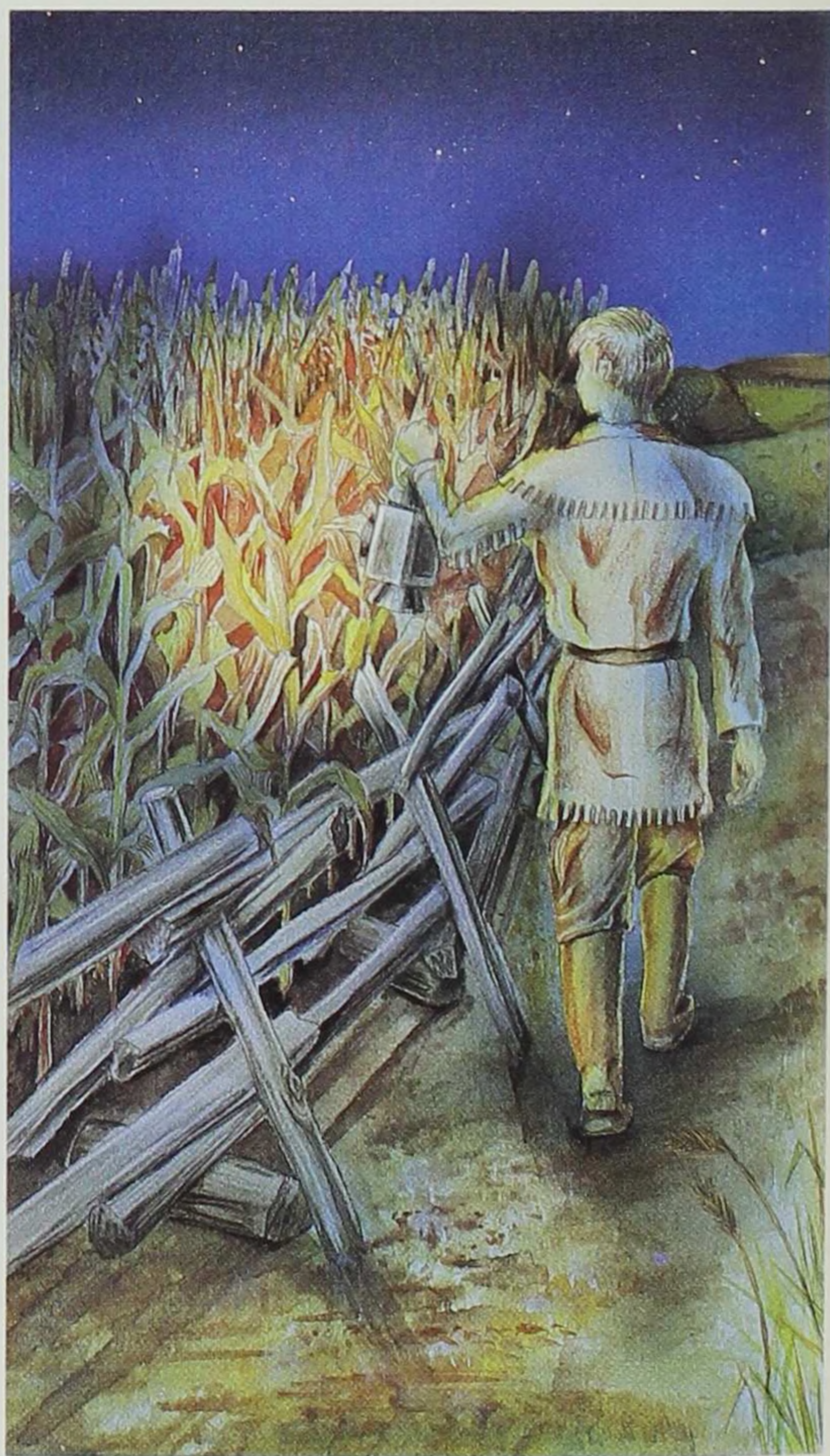
"Yes, sure," said I. "Here are threads from the child's hood found in places where she crawled through cracks in the fence."

The father clutched the threads and kissing them placed them in his vest pocket. "I am convinced," said he. Being informed of my cousin's wishes, Mr. Henderson then asked all to discontinue the search until further orders.

The horsemen dismounted and, tying their animals to the fence, gathered about the fires. Fence-rails were heaped upon the bonfires as freely as though they had been ordinary cordwood. The men brought corn from the adjoining field and parched it on the cob, either by burying the ears in hot embers or by toasting them on a stick. Armfuls of corn were also brought out for the horses. One seemed in a camp of Missouri jay-hawkers.

Men, on foot and on horseback, had been coming in all night, and a considerable number were still arriving, some from farms five and ten miles distant. Altogether nearly three hundred men, young and old, were in the field. There were present representatives of about twenty families, all nearly related to the lost child, with old Enoch Lewis, the Quaker grandfather, at the head.

News was sent to the mother that the child



had not gone out into the prairies; that her tracks were being followed southward among the cornfields, of the farms surrounding the village of West Liberty. This was news that would relieve her mind from fear of the packs of wolves that had been yelping in the prairie to the northward. The cowardly brutes would not venture southward past the bonfires and the crowds of men about them.

About two o'clock I stole away from the camp and went in search of my cousin. I followed the main fence leading south. I came to where the fence formed the dividing line between the Gregg and Bozarth farms, but still had not found my man. Climbing the fence of the Gregg farm into a great cornfield, I again moved along the line of the central fence. I had gone about ten rods when I was brought to a

halt by the voice of my cousin, the light of whose lantern I had long been straining my eyes to see.

"Well, which way?" said he. I looked about me on all sides, but in the dim starlight could see no one.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Here," said my cousin, "sit down."

Stooping, I peered into a fence-corner and found my man lying among the grass and weeds. "What are you doing here in the dark?"

"Waiting. My lantern went out just here."

"Well, why don't you come up to the camp and get another? If the child is not soon found she may chill to death."

"O, no — she has on over her dress a good thick cloak. Her father told me that. She's all right. She's found."

"Found! Where is she?"

"Not far away. She is taking another bit of a nap just now."

"Good Lord! and you lying here to let her take a nap while her father, mother and all her people are wild about her. Where is the poor little thing?"

"Somewhere out in this cornfield. I have not yet seen her."

"If you haven't seen her, how do you know where she is?"

"I'll tell you how I know. I tracked her out of her Uncle John's cornfield to this cornfield on the Gregg farm. She first went a little way into the prairie — I don't know how far — but turned and came back to the fence, as I was sure she would, for the rise in the prairie just there would make all before her the same as blank. She would turn about in search of some object familiar to her, and seeing the fence, would come back to it. Just ahead was the cross-fence of this field, which would bar her way, so I came on and soon found where she had crawled through it, leaving behind a little woollen mitten. I trailed her along the line of fence to this spot. Here she turned into the cornfield, and I had not followed her ten feet before my lantern went out, so I just halted here on the trail and curled up in the fence corner to wait for daylight."

"But how do you know she's alive and sleeping?"

"Well, half-an-hour ago I heard her cry for a

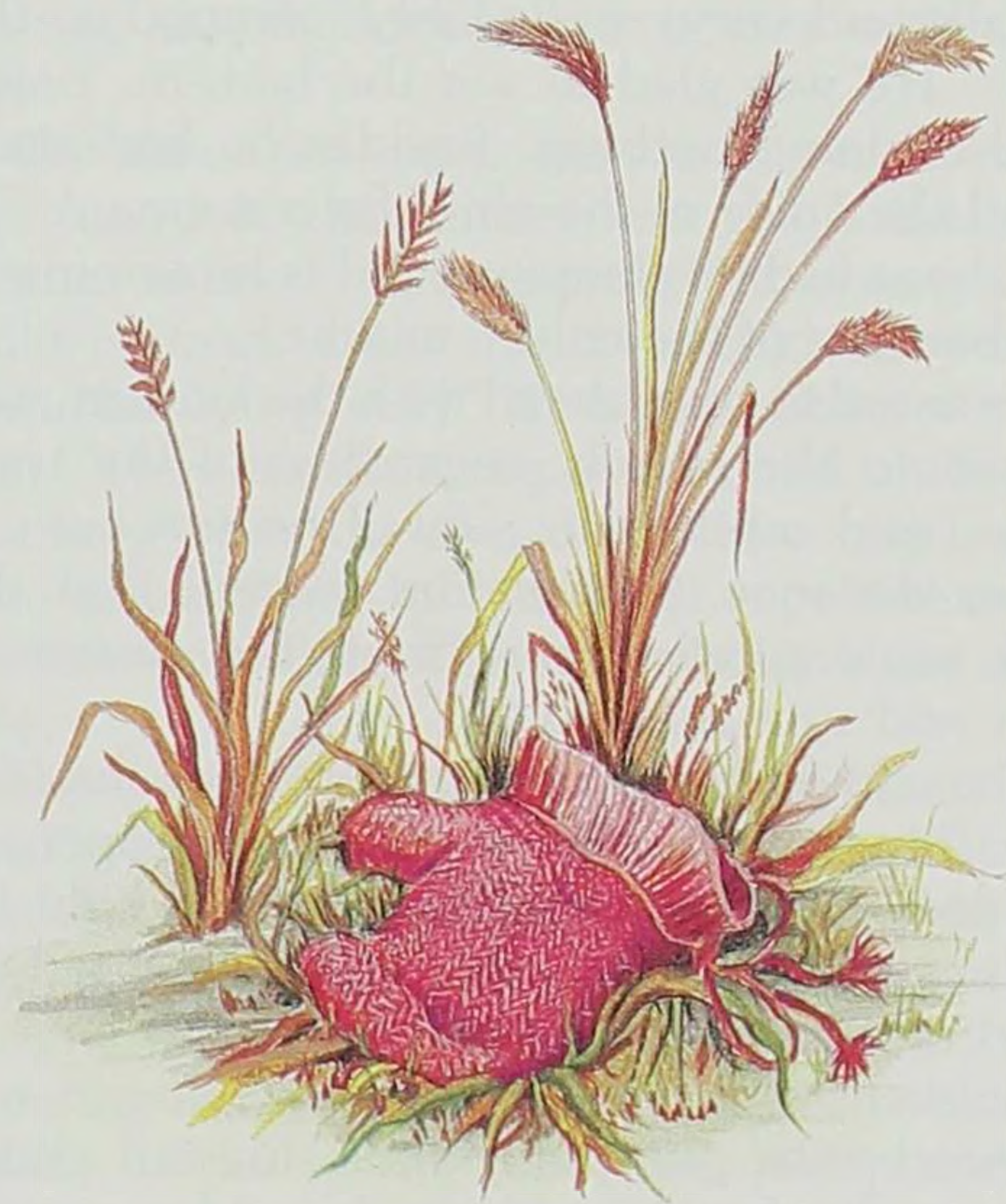
moment, just as children do at times when disturbed in their sleep. I started up, but as she ceased crying almost immediately, I lay down again with my ear to the ground. About daylight, when a little breeze starts up, it will be colder, and she will cry again. Then I may get her; if not, I'll find her as soon as it is light enough to see the trail. She is not two hundred yards from this spot, but I don't know the direction exactly."

"You take things very coolly. Let me go and get another lantern. Think of the wretchedness of the parents. Besides, the child may chill to death."

"No fear of her death from the cold. These little prairie youngsters are very hot-blooded. I have not found it cold lying here in the weeds and grass. I told the father I'd find his child, and I'm not going to have all that rabble rushing down here, tearing through the corn like wild men. Now, go back to camp. About daylight let the child's uncle, Clark Lewis, come on his horse to the cross-fence. Then you come on here, and we will go and get the child."

"But the father, what shall I tell him?"

"Give him this little mitten; tell him that I



have not lost the trail and that he shall have his child before the sun is an hour high. But tell him to keep this news to himself and remain quietly at camp. If the men up there want to ride about the prairies, let them go — I don't want a crowd down here in this cornfield."

I went back to the camp and, taking the father aside, gave him the little mitten and as much comfort as I could. A great fear that his little girl was dead immediately seized him, however. "No," said I, "she is sleeping quietly enough."

"Quietly sleeping! How do you know that?"

For answer I repeated what my cousin had told me. When I mentioned the crying of the child, the father wanted to at once rush away to my cousin. "No, let him go on in his own cool, slow and sure way. You will make him nervous and hasty."

Next I sought out Clark Lewis, and by the time I had told him what was required of him signs of dawn were visible in the east. He wished to set out immediately, and while he was getting his horse, I borrowed a lantern containing half a candle, in order to begin the trailing at once; for until after sunrise the light would be dim among the tall corn.

Clark Lewis halted at the cross fence while I went on and joined my cousin where he was literally and very comfortably "camped on the trail." He was glad to see the lantern, being tired of doing nothing. Besides he had again heard the voice of the child for a moment. "It has about had its sleep out and is beginning to fret because of the cold," said he.

I wanted to rush ahead with the lantern, and prosecute the search, regardless of the trail. "No," said my cousin, "for I am not sure of either distance or direction, except that the faint wailing cries came from the eastward. Slow and sure is the plan."

The old-fashioned tin lantern was found a poor thing for our use. It was only by opening the door of it that a sufficiently broad light for trailing could be obtained, and then it fell far short of the bull's-eye.

Between the rows of corn the ground was covered with pumpkin-vines, fox-tail grass, and weeds of various kinds. I could see nothing. My cousin, however, saw everything. When shown, I could see where a pumpkin-

vine had been dragged out of place by the tired feet of the little one, but I could not see the moccasin-prints, and failed to note bent and crushed weeds. As the ground was thickly covered and hidden in most places, it was practically by what he saw among the weeds and plants that my cousin followed the trail.

It was slow work, but by flashing the light ahead to where a vine had been dragged, or a corn-blade broken off, we occasionally went forward ten feet at a bound. The trail, too, zigzagged about — did not go straight ahead between any two corn-rows.

"She cannot be far away," said my cousin. "She has here been wandering in the dark. Darkness came upon her about the time she turned away from the fence. All looked alike to her, or she would have still held to the mark which had guided her so far — the fence."

Daylight found us still puzzling over the windings of the trail. In eccentricity it reminded me of the trails of the opossums I had followed in boyhood. Not a sound had we heard from the child. This worried me, as I feared she had chilled to death.

"Nothing of the kind," said my cousin. "She has heard us and is lying low. She is in a condition to be afraid of every noise she hears."

Sunrise came and we made better progress. The trail had turned and was leading back toward the fence. My cousin, who was about ten feet in advance, suddenly turned and motioned me to move forward. When I came up to him, he pointed in silence to a spot about three steps beyond where we stood. There in the midst of a mass of pumpkin-vines I saw the lower part of the child's red dress, but her head and the upper part of her body were hidden under some large vine leaves.

The sight gave me a great shock. "My God!" cried I, "she is dead! The poor child has perished."

At the sound of my voice up came the child's head. For a moment she stared at us with wild eyes, then on all fours she began to scuttle away, keeping her little body close to the ground, like a cat when in pursuit of game. In a moment my cousin had her in his arms. She clawed and fought him like a little wildcat, but not a word or sound escaped her lips.

She had got back to within fifty yards of the



fence. As we carried her out of the field, we tried to soothe her, but she would not speak and was constantly struggling to escape. When we had carried her to her Uncle Clark, who was waiting at the cross fence, and he had told her he would take her to her papa, the wildness went out of her face at once and she cried: "My papa! my papa!" She was her father's pet, and it was afterward found that it was in search of him that she had bundled up and sallied forth, knowing that he had gone to a neighbor's near the village.

When half-way back to the camp we came to the father, who, seated upon his horse, was waiting to hear from us. The child had hidden its face against its uncle's bosom, and seeing it carried in that way, the poor man thought it was dead. "Dead, dead!" cried he. "My poor little Lizzie is dead! Oh, I feared it!"

"Dead!" cried the uncle. "No, she is as much alive as a little wild-cat!"

In a moment Lizzie was in her father's arms and almost smothered with kisses. Still, she looked rather wild-eyed, and would not speak further than to occasionally murmur fondly, "Papa — my papa."

Wild were the cheers that rent the air when we arrived at the camp — cheer upon cheer.

Then a half-a-dozen young men rushed for their horses, and there was a wild race across the prairie to carry the news to the mother, and those who had all night been waiting at the house. Whooping like wild Indians, they thundered along, spurring with their heels and smiting the flanks of their horses with their hats.

The shout sent up at the camp, a mile away, was heard at the house, and the half-crazed mother at once misinterpreted it, crying: "My child is dead. Hear the shrieking! They have found her lying dead!" In vain the other women said: "They are cheering — the child is safe." It was only when the crowd of wild young horsemen came flying in with their report that the mother would allow herself to believe the child safe.

The crowding about of so many men and their wild cheering so frightened the lost girl that she clung to her father's neck and hid her face in his bosom. Then he all of a sudden caught the excitement of the moment, and spurring his horse, dashed homeward about as wildly as the young men who had preceded him. □