

Indian Captive

By Lois Lenski

Chapter One Come What May

Molly-child, now supper's done, go fetch Neighbor Dixon's horse."

Molly looked up at her father. At the far end of the long table he stood. He was lean, lanky and raw-boned. Great knotty fists hung at the ends of his long, thin arms. His eyes looked kind though his face was stern.

"All I need is another horse for a day or two," the man went on. "Neighbor Dixon said I could borrow his. I'll get that south field plowed tomorrow and seeded to corn."

"Yes, Pa!" answered Molly. She reached for a piece of corn-pone from the plate. She munched it contentedly. How good it tasted!

Corn! All their life was bound up with corn. Corn and work. Work to grow the corn, to protect it and care for it, to fight for it, to harvest it and stow it away at last for winter's food. So it was always, so it would be always to the end of time. How could they live without corn?

The Jemison family sat around the supper table. Its rough-hewn slabs, uncovered by cloth, shone soft-worn and shiny clean. A large earthen bowl, but a short time before filled with boiled and cut-up meat, sat empty in the center. Beside it, a plate with the leftover pieces of corn-pone.

"You hear me?" asked Thomas Jemison again. "You ain't dreamin'?"

The two older boys, John and Tom, threw meaningful looks at their sister, but said no word. Betsey, tall, slender fifteen-year-old, glanced sideways at their mother.

Molly colored slightly and came swiftly back from dreaming. "Yes, Pa!" she said, obediently. She reached for another piece of corn-pone.

Inside, she felt a deep content. Spring was here again. The sun-warmed, plowed earth would feel good to her bare feet. She saw round, pale yellow grains of seed-corn dropping from her hand into the furrow. She saw her long, thin arms waving to keep the crows and blackbirds off--the fight had begun. The wind blew her long loose hair about her face and the warm sun kissed her cheeks. Spring had come again.

"Can't one of the boys go?" asked Mrs. Jemison. "Dark's a-comin' on and the trail's through the woods. . ."

"Have ye forgot the chores?" Thomas Jemison turned to his wife and spoke fretfully. "There's the stock wants tendin'--they need fodder to chomp on through the night. And the milkin' not even started. Sun's got nigh two hours to go 'fore dark. Reckon that's time enough for a gal to go a mile and back."

"But it's the woods trail. . . " began Mrs. Jemison anxiously. "'Tain't safe at night-time. . ."

"Then she can sleep to Dixon's and be back by sunup," said the girl's father, glancing sternly in Molly's direction. He sat down on a stool before the fireplace and began to shell corn into the wooden dye-tub.

"Mary Jermison, do you hear me?" he thundered.

"Yes, Pa!" said Molly again. But she did not move. She sat still, munching corn-pone.

Jane Jemison said no more. Instead, she looked down at her hands folded in her lap. Her hands so seldom at rest. She was a small, tired-looking woman, baffled by both work and worry. Eight years of life in a frontier settlement in eastern Pennsylvania had taken away her fresh youth and had aged her beyond her years.

Little Matthew, a boy of three, climbed into his mother's lap. She caught the brown head close to her breast for a moment, then put him hastily down as a waiting cry came to her ears. The baby in the homemade cradle beside her had wakened. The woman stopped wearily, picked him up, then sat down to nurse him.

"Ye'll have to wash up, Betsey," she said.

Molly's thought had traveled far, but she hadn't herself had time to move. She was still sitting bolt upright on the three-legged stool when her ears picked up the roll of a horse's hoofs.

Nor was she the only one. The others heard, too. As if in answer to an expected signal, the faces turned inquiring and all eyes found the door. All ears strained for a call of greeting, but none came. In less time than it takes for three words to be said, the door burst open and a man stumbled in.

It was Neighbor Wheelock. He was short and heavy. Like Thomas Jemison, he too had the knotty look of a hard worker, of a frontier fighter. It was only in his face that weakness showed.

Wheelock gave no glance at woman or children. He said in a low but distinct voice to Thomas: "You heard what's happened?"

The clatter of a falling stool shook the silence and a cry of fear escaped. Betsey, white-faced and thin, clapped her hands over her mouth. Mrs. Jemison, the nursing baby still at her breast, stood up. "Let's hear what 'tis," she said, calmly.

Chet Wheelock needed no invitation to speak. The words popped out of his mouth like bullets from a loaded gun.

"It's the Injuns again!" he cried, fiercely. "They've burnt Ned Haskins out and took his wife and children captive. They've murdered the whole Johnson family. They're a-headin' down Conewago, Creek towards Sharp's Run, a-killn', a-butcherin' and a-plunderin' as they come. There ain't a safe spot this side of Philadelphy. I'm headin' back east and I'm takin' my brother Jonas's family with me."

Thomas Jemison looked up from his corn shelling, but his placid face gave no hint of troubled thoughts. A gust of wind nipped round the house and blew the thick plank door shut with a bang. The children stared, wide-eyed. Jane Jemison sat down on a stool, as if the load of her baby had grown too heavy and there was no more strength left in her arms.