

Clearing in the Sky

(Jesse Stuart)

"This is the way, Jess," said my father, pointing with his cane across the deep valley below us. "I want to show you something you've not seen for many years!"

"Isn't it too hot for you to do much walking?" I wiped the streams of sweat from my face to keep them from stinging my eyes.

I didn't want to go with him. I had just finished walking a half mile uphill from my home to his. I had carried a basket of dishes to Mom. There were two slips in the road and I couldn't drive my car. And I knew how hot it was. It was 97 in the shade. I knew that from January until April my father had gone to eight different doctors. One of the doctors had told him not to walk the length of a city block. He told my father to get a taxi to take him home. But my father walked home five miles across the mountain and told Mom what the doctor had said. Forty years ago a doctor had told him the same thing. And he had lived to raise a family of five children. He had done as much hard work in those years as any man.

I could not protest to him now. He had made up his mind. When he made up his mind to do a thing, he would do it if he had to crawl. He didn't care if it was 97 in the shade or 16 below zero. I wiped more sweat from my face as I followed him down the little path between the pasture and the meadow.

Suddenly he stopped at the edge of the meadow, took his pocket knife from his pocket, and cut a wisp of alfalfa. He held it up between him and the sun.

"Look at this, Jess!" he bragged. "Did you ever see better alfalfa grow out of the earth?"

"It's the best looking hay I've ever seen any place," I said, "I've not seen better looking alfalfa even in the Little Sandy River bottoms!"

"When I bought this little farm, everybody around here said I'd end up with my family at the country poor farm if I tried to make a living here," he bragged again. "It took me thirty years to improve these old worn-out acres to make them do this!"

"I like these woods, Jess," my father said. "Remember when we used to come here to hunt for squirrels? Remember when we sat beneath these hickories and the squirrels threw green hickory shells down at us? The morning wind just at the break of day in August was so good to breathe. I can't forget those days. And in October when the rabbits were ripe and the frosts had come and the hickory leaves had turned yellow and when the October winds blew they rustled the big leaves from the trees and they fell like yellow rain drops to the ground! Remember," he said, looking at me with his pale blue eyes. "How our hounds, Rags and Scout, would make the rabbits circle! These were good days, Jess! That's why I remember this mountain."

"Is that what you wanted to show me?" I asked.

"Oh, no, no," he said as he began to climb the second bluff that lifted abruptly from the flat toward the sky. The pines on top of the mountain above us looked as if the fingers of their long boughs were fondling the substance of a white cloud. Whatever my father wanted me to see was on top of the highest point of my farm. And with the exception of the last three years, I had been over this point many times. I had never seen anything extraordinary upon this high point of rugged land. I had seen the beauty of many wild flowers, a few rock cliffs, and many species of hard and soft-wood trees.

"Why do you take the path straight up the point?" I asked. "Look at these other paths! What are they doing here?"

Within the distance of a few yards, several paths left the main path and circled around the slope, gradually climbing the mountain.

"All paths go to the same place," he answered.

"Then why do you take the steep one?" I asked.

"I'll explain later," he spoke with half-breaths.

He rested a minute to catch his second wind while I managed to stand on the path by holding to a little sapling, because it was too steep for my feet to hold unless I braced myself.

Then my father started to move slowly up the path again, supporting himself with his cane. I followed at his heels. Just a few steps in front of him a fox squirrel crossed the path and ran up a hickory tree.

"See that, Jess!" he shouted.

"Yes, I did," I answered.

"That brings back something to me," he said, "brings back the old days to see a fox squirrel but this won't bring back as much as something I'm goin' to show you."

My curiosity was aroused. I thought he had found a new kind of wild grass, or an unfamiliar herb, or a new kind of tree. For I remembered the time he had found a coffee tree in our woods. It is, as far as I know, the only one of its kind growing in our country.

Only twice did my father stop to wipe the sweat from his eyes as he climbed the second steep bluff toward the fingers of the pines. We reached the limbless trunks of these tall straight pines whose branches reached toward the blue depth of the sky, or the white cloud was now gone. I saw a clearing, a small clearing of not more than three-fourths of an acre in the heart of this wilderness right on the mountain top.

"Now, you're comin' to something, son," he said as he pushed down the top wire so he could cross the fence. "This is something I want you to see!"

"Who did this?" I asked. "Who cleared this land and fenced it? Fenced it against what?"

"Stray cattle if they ever get out of the pasture," he answered me curtly. "I cleared this land. And I fenced it!"

"But why did you ever climb to this mountain top and do this?" I asked him. "Look at the fertile land we have in the valley!"

"Fertile," he laughed as he reached down and picked up a double handful of leaf-rot loam. "This is the land, son! This is it. I've tried all kinds of land!"

Then he smelled the dirt. He whiffed and whiffed the smell of this wild dirt into his nostrils.

"Just like fresh air," he said as he let the dirt run between his fingers. "It's pleasant to touch, too," he added.

"But, Dad—" I said.

"I know what you think," he interrupted. "Your mother thinks the same thing. She wonders why I ever climbed this mountain top to raise my potatoes, yams, and tomatoes! But, Jess," he almost whispered, "anything grown in new ground like this has a better flavor. Wait until my tomatoes are ripe. You'll never taste sweeter tomatoes in your life."

"They'll soon be ripe, too," I said as I looked at the dozen or more rows of tomatoes on the lower side of the patch.

Then above the tomatoes were a half-dozen rows of yams. Above the yams were, perhaps, three dozen rows of potatoes.

"I don't see a weed in this patch," I laughed. "Won't they grow here?"

"I won't let em," he said. "Now this is what I've been wanting you to see!"

"This is the cleanest patch I've ever seen," I bragged. "But I still don't see why you climbed the top of this mountain to clear this patch. And you did all this against your doctor's orders!"

"Which one?" he asked, laughing.

Then he sat down on a big oak stump and I sat down on a small black-gum stump near him. This was the only place on the mountain where the sun could shine to the ground. And on the lower side of the clearing there was a rim of shadow over the rows of dark stalwart plants loaded with green tomatoes.

"What is the reason for your planting this patch up here?" I asked.

"Twenty times in my life," he said, "a doctor has told me to go home and be with my family as long as I could. Told me not to work. Not to do anything but to live and enjoy the few days I had left with me. If the doctors have been right," he said, winking at me, "I have cheated death many times! Now, I've reached the years the Good Book allows to man in his lifetime upon this earth! Three score years and ten!"

He got up from the stump and wiped the raindrops of sweat from his red-wrinkled face with his big blue bandanna.

"And something else, Jess," he said, motioning for me to follow him to the upper edge of the clearing, "you won't understand until you reach three score and ten! After these years your time is borrowed. And when you live on that kind of time, something goes back. Something I cannot explain. You go back to the places you knew and loved. See this steep hill slope." He pointed down from the upper rim of the clearing toward the deep valley below. "Your mother and I, when she was nineteen and I was twenty-two cleared this mountain

slope together. We raised corn, beans, and pumpkins here," he continued, his voice rising with excitement – he talked with his hands, too. "Those were the days. This wasn't the land one had to build up. It was already here as God had made it and we had to do was to clear the trees and burn the bush. I ploughed this mountain with cattle the first time it was ever ploughed. And we raised more than a barrel of corn to the shock. That's why I came back up here. I went back to our youth. And this was the only land left like that was."

"And, Jess," he bragged, "regardless of my three score years and ten, I ploughed it. Ploughed it with a mule! I have, with just a little help, done all the work. It's like the land your mother and I used to farm here when I brought my gun to the field and took home a mess of fox squirrels every evening."

I looked at the vast mountain slope below where my mother and father had farmed. And I could remember, years later, when they farmed this land. It was on this steep slope that my father once made me a little wooden plough. That was when I was six years old and they brought me to the field to thin corn. I lost my little plough in a furrow and I cried and cried until he made me another plough. But I never loved the second plough as I did the first one.

Now, to look at the mountain slope, grown up with tall trees, many of them big enough to have sawed into lumber at the mill, it was hard to believe that my father and mother had cleared this mountain slope and had farmed it for many years. For many of the trees were sixty feet tall and the wild vines had matted their tops together.

"And, Jess," he almost whispered, "the doctors told me to sit still and to take life easy. I couldn't do it. I had to work. I had to go back. I had to smell this rich loam again. This land is not like the land I had to build to grow alfalfa. This is real land. I had to come back and dig in it. I had to smell it, sift it through my fingers again. And I wanted to taste yams, tomatoes, and potatoes grown in this land."

From this mountain top I looked far in every direction over the rugged hills my father and mother had cleared and farmed corn, maize, and cane. The one slope they hadn't cleared was the one from which my father had cleared his last, small patch.

I followed him from his clearing in the sky, down a new path, toward the deep valley below.

"But why do you have so many paths coming from the flat up the steep second bluff?" I asked, since he had promised that he would explain this to me later.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Early last spring, I couldn't climb straight up the steep path. That was when the doctor didn't give me a week to live. I made a longer, easier path so I wouldn't have to do so much climbing. Then, as I got better," he explained. "I made another path that was a little steeper. And as I continued to get better, I made steeper paths. That was one way of knowing I was getting better all the time!"

I followed him down the path that wound this way and that, three times the length of the path we had climbed.

Theme

The author's father has a weak heart. For forty years the doctors have been telling him to be careful – forbidding him to work on his farm because he hasn't long to live. Now, in spite of their prediction, he's lived to be seventy years old, and he wants to show his son something important on the top of the mountain. In this simple story, the son reflects his father's deep love of nature and the strength of the human spirit.

Reading Notes

97 in the shade	temperature of 97°F
protest	oppose
a wisp of alfalfa	a thin stem of leafy green hay, used to feed horses and cows
brag	boast, praise oneself
sapling	a young tree
brace	support, reinforce
bluff	headland with a broad and steep face
curtly	hardly polite
loam	a rich soil consisting of clay, silt and sand
whiff	smell, inhale the odor of something
yam	orange coloured vegetable root, somewhat resembling a sweet potato
stalwart	strong and vigorous in body, mind or spirit
The Good Book	The Bible
three score years and ten	seventy years
bandanna	a large figured handkerchief made of dyed cloth
black gum	a tree having light but tough wood
mess of fox squirrels	a quantity of fox squirrels enough to cook for a meal.

EXERCISES

1. Choose the correct answer.
 - i. The old man wanted to show his son

a) his farm.	b) his land.
c) patch of clearing.	d) river.

- ii. The day was
 a) hot. b) pleasant.
 c) rainy. d) humid.
- iii. How many years ago did the doctor advise the old man to take rest?
 a) ten b) twenty
 c) thirty d) forty
- iv. How many children did the old man have?
 a) three b) four
 c) five d) seven
- v. What did the old man cut with his pocket knife?
 a) a sapling b) a flower
 c) a wisp of alfalfa d) a tomato
- vi. In how many years did the old man improve the land?
 a) twenty b) thirty
 c) forty d) sixty
- vii. Why did the old man hunt for the squirrels?
 a) to sell b) to kill
 c) to cook for meal d) to pet
- viii. What type of special tree was found by the old man?
 a) cherry b) apple
 c) orange d) coffee
- ix. The clearing on the top was not more than
 a) three acres. b) four acres.
 c) two acres. d) three-fourths of an acre.
- x. The land was fenced by
 a) the son. b) the mother.
 c) the old man. d) the brother of the old man.

2. Some of the statements below are true and some are false. Mark the true or false statements.

- i. Jess's father was a weak man.
 ii. The old man followed his doctors' advice all his life.
 iii. The old man invited his son to take a walk up a mountain path.
 iv. When the old man reached seventy, he wanted to go back to farming land that had never been touched.
 v. Thirty years' labour of the old man proved futile.

- vi. The old man took the easy path to go to the top.
- vii. The old man took rest twice while climbing up the steep bluff.
- viii. The old man did not have trust in God.
- ix. The old man felt relieved of the fruit of his toil.
- x. The vegetables that the old man grew in his secret garden were better flavored because of the sunshine in the clearing.

3. Answer the following questions. (in one or two sentences)

- i. Why didn't the old man follow the advice of the doctors?
- ii. What had the doctors told the old man?
- iii. Where did the old man take his son?
- iv. Had the son ever been there before?
- v. What were the names of the vegetables the old man grew on his farm?
- vi. Why did the old man take the steep path?
- vii. Why did the son at the age of six cry?
- viii. What were the feelings of the old man at the age of seventy?
- ix. Why had the old man planted his secret garden?

4. Write the answers to the following questions in 50 - 100 words.

- i. Describe the physical appearance of the old man.
- ii. How did the old man feel about the land?
- iii. What did the son remember from his childhood? Were these good memories?
- iv. Write the story in your own words.
- v. What moral lesson does the story teach?

5. Use the correct forms of the verbs given in brackets.

- i. I (carry) a basket of dishes to Mom.
- ii. I (know) how hot it was.
- iii. I (follow) him down the little path.
- iv. I (buy) this little farm around here.
- v. Is that what you (want) to show me?

6. Punctuate the following lines.

now youre coming to something son he said as he pushed down the top wire so that he could cross the fence this is something i want you to see
