

**ERSKINE
DALE, PIONEER**

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Erskine Dale, pioneer by John Fox Jr.

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JOHN FOX JR.

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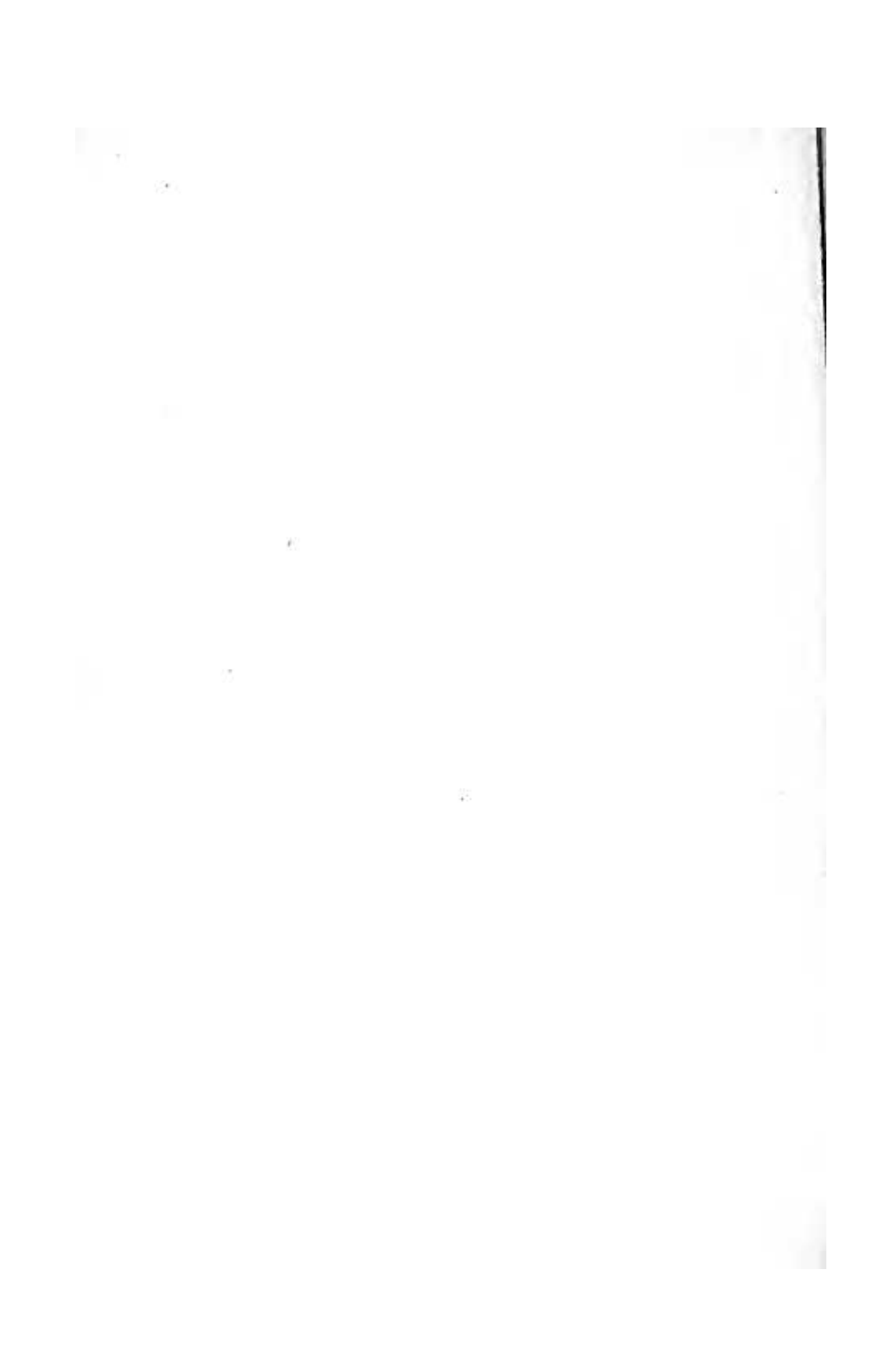
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ERSKINE DALE—PIONEER

I

STREAKS of red ran upward, and in answer the great gray eye of the wilderness lifted its mist-fringed lid. From the green depths came the fluting of a lone wood-thrush. Through them an owl flew on velvety wings for his home in the heart of a primeval poplar. A cougar leaped from the low limb of an oak, missed, and a shuddering deer streaked through a forest aisle, bounded into a little clearing, stopped rigid, sniffed a deadlier enemy, and whirled into the wilderness again. Still deeper in the depths a boy with a bow and arrow and naked, except for scalp-lock and breech-clout, sprang from sleep and again took flight along a buffalo trail. Again, not far behind him, three grunting savages were taking up the print of his moccasined feet.

An hour before a red flare rose within

the staked enclosure that was reared in the centre of the little clearing, and above it smoke was soon rising. Before the first glimmer of day the gates yawned a little and three dim shapes appeared and moved leisurely for the woods—each man with a long flintlock rifle in the hollow of his arm, a hunting-knife in his belt, and a coonskin cap on his head. At either end of the stockade a watch-tower of oak became visible and in each a sleepy sentinel yawned and sniffed the welcome smell of frying venison below him. In the pound at one end of the fort, and close to the eastern side, a horse whinnied, and a few minutes later when a boy slipped through the gates with feed in his arms there was more whinnying and the stamping of impatient feet.

“Gol darn ye!” the boy yelled, “can’t ye wait till a feller gits *his* breakfast?”

A voice deep, lazy, and resonant came from the watch-tower above:

“Well, I’m purty hungry myself.”

“See any Injuns, Dave?”

“Not more’n a thousand or two, I reckon.”

The boy laughed:

"Well, I reckon you won't see any while I'm around—they're afeerd o' *me*."

"I don't blame 'em, Bud. I reckon that blunderbuss o' yours would come might' nigh goin' through a pat o' butter at twenty yards." The sentinel rose towering to the full of his stature, stretched his mighty arms with a yawn, and lightly leaped, rifle in hand, into the enclosure. A girl climbing the rude ladder to the tower stopped midway.

"Mornin', Dave!"

"Mornin', Polly!"

"I was comin' to wake you up," she smiled.

"I just waked up," he yawned, humoring the jest.

"You don't seem to have much use for this ladder."

"Not unless I'm goin' up; and I wouldn't then if I could jump as high as I can fall." He went toward her to help her down.

"I wouldn't climb very high," she said, and scorning his hand with a tantalizing little grimace she leaped as lightly as had he to the ground. Two older women who sat about a kettle of steaming clothes watched her.