



If they run him down and tie his hands  
and feet and bring him down here,  
I thought, that won't tame him. That  
will make him wilder than ever.

## The Moon Child from Wolfe Creek

JESSE STUART

### I DRAGONS OF A DIFFERENT KIND

Poets have much to say about our secret fears. These, too, are “dragons” we must fight.

#### *In Waste Places*

1. What does the desert in the poem stand for?
2. What does the lion represent?
3. Where does the lion really come from?

#### *Check*

1. What weapon does the speaker use to fight the dragon of darkness?
2. Is there a winner in the fight?

#### *Challenge*

1. Who and where is the speaker of this poem?
2. What reaction does the speaker have to the pole vaulter?
3. What must a person depend upon in such a sport?

#### *Directions to the Armorer*

1. What three pieces of equipment does the speaker ask for?
2. What is unusual about each?
3. What is the speaker's evaluation of himself or herself as a dragon fighter?

### II IMPLICATIONS

1. Dragons are never real but are created by our fears.
2. The memorable moments in life occur when a person rises to meet the challenge of a personal dragon.
3. Ordinary things may become dragons for some people.

#### AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

When I wrote my book about my years as a teacher, *The Thread That Runs So True*, the incident about the “moon child” was a chapter in that book. However, before I sent the manuscript to the publisher, I removed that chapter. The reason is that I was sure no one would believe the story of a boy who was afraid of a schoolhouse.

Sometime later, after the book was published, I was talking with several teachers, all of whom had taught for many years. As we shared our classroom experiences, I happened to tell about the moon child. I then asked if any of them had ever had a pupil who was afraid of a schoolhouse. They told me of no less than six similar cases. One elderly, retired teacher told me of the case of the pupil who was “wild as a fox.” This teacher said this boy walked toward school with the other children until he got within sight of the building and then turned and started running in the opposite direction. The teacher then sent

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every boy in the school after him — they ran after that boy like a pack of hounds, to catch him and bring him back to school. I then learned that this boy, even though he was punished for running away from school, and even though his parents did everything they could to keep him in school, never adjusted to the classroom and schoolwork.

Other teachers told me stories of how they had tried to deal with the problem of the student who was so frightened of school he wouldn't even come inside.

I was interested in what these teachers had done because when I was teaching, I had such a pupil. I didn't punish that pupil; I sought another solution. Now read the story to see if you agree that I was right.

I don't want to tell on anybody," Vennie McCoy whispered to me, "but I think you ought to know Don Crump didn't come all the way to school. He started with us but he didn't get here."

"Where did he go?" I asked. Vennie stood beside me and moved his left bare foot on the pine-board floor of the Lonesome Valley schoolhouse. "Is he playing hookey?"

"He's up there on the mountaintop," Vennie said. "Go to the door and look toward the sky and you'll see 'im."

"What's he doing up there?" I asked in low tones. My Lonesome Valley pupils looked at one another and then at me as they listened to our conversation. "Why doesn't he come on down to school?"

"He's afraid, Mr. Stuart," Vennie whispered.

I walked to the door and looked toward the peak.

"See 'im yander," Vennie said. He pointed to a tall boy who was walking across a clearing. Just above him on the ridgeline a flock of white clouds floated on a sea of July blue. I watched this tall,

slender boy walk back and forth across the little clearing. He would walk first to the tall timber on one side and then he would walk back to the other. His long, lean, restless body was etched<sup>1</sup> against the white clouds. This was hard for me to understand, since it was my first day of teaching in Lonesome Valley.

"Where does Don Crump live?" I asked Vennie as I stood wondering what to do.

"He lives on Wolfe Creek."

"Any other family live near him?"

"Nope."

"How long is Wolfe Creek?"

"Five or six miles long."

"What does Don do at home?"

"He helps his pappy with the croppin' during the season," Vennie explained. "All winter long he hunts and traps. That's the way the Crumps make some money. They sell hides. Don is a good hunter. He can put his nose down to a dirt hole and tell if there's anything in it. And if there's something in the hole he can tell you what it is."

"Are you sure he can do that?" I laughed.

"Oh, yes he can, Mr. Stuart," said Birch Caudill, a small redheaded fifth-grade pupil. "I've seen him do it. Once I saw him lay flat on his stummick and put his face in a water-seap hole and he sniffed and sniffed like a hound-dog, and he says to me when he took his head out of the hole: 'Birch, he's back there. It's a possum.' And we started diggin'. We followed the water-seap hole, a-diggin' through rocks and roots until we come to a big possum a-layin' there asleep in a dry bed of leaves. I'd as soon trust Don Crump as I would the best hound-dog in these parts."

Several of the boys and girls looked at one another and smiled as I, their

1. etched, outlined clearly and sharply.

seventeen-year-old teacher, stood in the door watching the restless figure walk back and forth like a trapped animal in a cage. I wondered why he didn't walk under the tall timber and hide. I wondered if he looked down toward the Little Lonesome schoolhouse, deep down in the narrow-gauged valley, and saw me standing in the door watching him. I tried to reason what to do with him. I wondered why he didn't walk up the steep slope to the ridgetop and into one of the white clouds that were floating lazily along the calm sky. While I stood there, I wondered why a boy of his wild restless nature, afraid of people and of school, would let the tall timber and the white clouds fence him within the semi-circle of clearing where somebody pastured cattle and sheep.

"You want us to get 'im for you, Mr. Stuart?" Vennie asked.

"How would you get 'im?" I asked.

"Run 'im down and tie his hands and feet and fetch 'im to you," Vennie replied.

"Maybe you could do that," I said.

"He's fast as a rabbit but we could do it," Vennie bragged. "We've played fox and dog with him and he's faster than any of us, but if enough of us go after 'im and go up every side of the mountain and surround him, he can't get away."

"Yep, we can ketch 'im for you, Mr. Stuart," said Tom Adams, a blue-eyed shaggy-haired seventh grade pupil. "We can go up the mountain in different directions and hide in the green timber all around the clearin'. Then somebody can give a signal and we can run out into the clearin' and ketch Don. I could almost slip up on 'im myself. I've slipped up on rabbits a-settin' and ketched 'em with my bare hands. I once ketched a ground hog that way. Nabbed 'im by the neck so he couldn't bite me."

Then all of the pupils laughed. Don Crump's being up there on the mountain had disturbed all of us. Everybody who had started to school had come but Don. And one of the first decisions I had to make in my teaching career was what to do with him. *If they run him down and tie his hands and feet and bring him down here, I thought, that won't tame him. That will make him wilder than ever.*

Another thought flashed through my mind. I remembered how my father had tamed cattle when they went wild in our big pasture. When we put them on grass in late March and left them alone, except for occasional visits to salt and count them, many went wild. My father finally tamed the wild ones until he had them licking salt out of his hand.

"Want us to go after 'im?" Vennie was impatient. "We'll fetch 'im in."

"Shore will," Tom Adams said.

*They're wanting to get out too, I thought.*

"No, leave him alone," I said. "If he likes it up there that's quite all right with me. I don't believe in roping a boy hand and foot and carrying him inside a schoolhouse. You can tell him when you see him again the school here is a fine place. Tell him we have a good time playing and that you believe he will like it. Tell him to come on down. Tell him we don't have anything here that will hurt him."

Many of my pupils looked quietly at each other and smiled. I took my last look at Don, who was still walking around in the clearing, up near the white clouds. I turned and walked back down the aisle with Vennie.

At the first recess, when my pupils played The Needle's Eye, I looked up to the high hill in the clearing and I didn't see Don Crump. Not at first. But I finally located Don sitting on a stump looking

down in the valley toward the school. He was watching the pupils play. Don Crump sat there on the stump during the fifteen-minute recess (we let it run a little overtime) and looked on. Not one of my pupils paid any attention to him now. They were too busy playing. I did pay attention to him but he didn't know it. I didn't want Don to know I wanted him in school.

At the noon hour we, teacher and pupils, sat on the crumpled roots of the giant sycamores that grew all around the schoolhouse and ate our lunches. These sycamores with their massive canopy of leaves stood betwixt us and the hot July sun. My pupils hurried to eat their lunches so they could play The Needle's Eye. Just as they were choosing sides to play, I looked toward the clearing to see if I could see Don Crump. He walked from the tall timber on the east side.

During the noon hour, I played The Needle's Eye with my pupils. Often, I looked up. Don was back on the stump where he had sat that morning. When Vennie McCoy saw him, before the noon hour was over, he came to me and wanted to get all of the boys in the school and chase him. But I wouldn't let him. I told him to leave Don alone. If Don wanted to come to school that was all right. If he didn't he could stay away. This was hard for Vennie McCoy, Tom Adams, Ova Salyers and Guy Hawkins to understand. They couldn't understand why they were in school and Don Crump was sitting on a stump high upon the mountainside in the clearing, watching us play.

On the second day of school, Don Crump, in the early hours, walked back and forth in the clearing shade. This was before recess. During recess he sat on the same stump and watched us. At the noon hour he came from the tall timber

on the east side of the clearing and watched us playing in the valley below. In the afternoon he disappeared again. At the afternoon recess he emerged from the shade of the tall timber to watch us. He had a little world of his own up on the mountainside. He had found something to interest him. That was watching us. And I was watching him too.

"Don brings his dinner in a lard bucket," Vennie told me on the third day. "His pappy thinks he comes to school. But he goes to the woods, as you know, Mr. Stuart. You want me to go to Wolfe Creek and tell his pappy what he's doin'?"

"No, whatever you do, don't tell his father anything," I said. "Leave Don Crump alone. When he wants to come to school, he'll come."

*Takes a long time to tame cattle with salt, I thought. Maybe Don will finally get here. He's a little closer now.*

For on this third day Don had moved down the mountainside by a hundred yards or more. He was getting closer, where he could see us better from the new stump he'd found. He could hear us sing as we played The Needle's Eye. He could see us better as we ran foot races and played "anti-over the schoolhouse," with a twine ball.

On the last day of the first week, Don came still closer. He was, perhaps, within a quarter of a mile of the schoolhouse now. But he was getting closer, and that pleased me. There was something about the place where the pupils played and had a good time that attracted Don. There was life, laughter and play among us. He must have realized that he was on the outside of all this. He must have craved association, play and laughter with us.

In the second week of school he moved down to a wild blackberry patch where there was a big rock covered with



*"Faraway," Andrew Wyeth.*

gray lichen moss. He sat on this big rock and watched us.

"I was tellin' Pappy and Mammy about Don Crump," said Tom Adams, as he walked over and stood beside me on the noon hour of the first day in the second week. "Pappy said he was teched.<sup>2</sup> Mammy said he was a moon child."

I stood and looked at Tom.

"What is a moon child?" I asked.

"Born when the moon is tilted in the sky," he explained. "All people are strange that are born when the moon is tilted. Funny in some way or another, so Mammy and Pappy say."

"There's not anything wrong with Don," I said. "He is just not ready to come to school."

"Funny he don't like school," Tom said. "It's a wonderful place. Wouldn't miss it for nothin'."

Then Tom raced back and joined the circle playing *The Needle's Eye*.

During the second week, Don Crump moved from rock to stump and shade to shade until he was within one hundred yards of the schoolhouse. I warned my pupils not to talk to him, or about him, or even notice him. I told them to go ahead with their play as if Don Crump were not near the schoolhouse, and they did. Don was close enough now to see everything. He could hear the wild, high laughter of my pupils. He could watch the two teams, that had been chosen in the game of *The Needle's Eye*, pull against each other. He could see one team outpull the other and the pupils spill on the schoolyard and get up and brush the dust from their clothes. He could hear them laugh louder than the wild

<sup>2</sup> touched, slightly crazy.

wind he had so often heard in the lonely treetops. Don sat upon the slope and smiled. This play fascinated him. On the last day of the second week, he walked onto the schoolyard, though he stood a safe distance away from the pupils. He kept a good distance away from me.

In the beginning of the third week, Don Crump walked down the little, narrow, winding valley road with the pupils. Then I got my first good look at this tall, blue-eyed, handsome, intelligent-looking boy. His hair, blond as frost-bitten crab grass, came about to his shoulders. He came onto the schoolyard but he wouldn't come inside the schoolhouse. I never tried to get him inside. He sat on a gnarled<sup>3</sup> root in the sycamore shade while school went on inside the house. He must have listened to what we said inside. When I had the chance, at recesses and noon, I looked at him and smiled, though I never approached him. My pupils left him alone too. For during the beginning of this third week, he stood nearby and watched the pupils play. He stood and watched and clapped his hands and laughed loudly at times. He kept getting closer to the circle of pupils marching around and around singing *The Needle's Eye*. Before the week was over, he joined the circle and played with the pupils. But, never once did he venture inside the schoolhouse.

While the rest of us were inside, Don Crump played around the schoolhouse. Often he sat on the sycamore root and whistled. He whistled a tune like the wind was playing in the sycamore leaves above. Ova Salyers told me once that he had whistled like the wind so much, while he was alone in the woods, that he could whistle the tune of any wind. This was hard for me to believe, until once I walked outside the schoolhouse and listened to Don's whistling on the syc-

more root below, the tune of the wind in the sycamore leaves above him. He was whistling the tune of the wind all right. But, to leave this boy outside the schoolroom, while the rest of us were inside, caused considerable talk among the school patrons of my district. Many of the patrons accused me of having a "pet," one I let do as he pleased. Of course, many of my pupils didn't understand what I was trying to do and they went home and told their parents about Don Crump and what I had told them about leaving him alone. Several of the parents dismissed Don Crump and said he should not be allowed to go to school, since he was a moon child. A few of the parents thought I was afraid of him.

But on Monday afternoon, of my first month at Lonesome Valley, Don Crump came inside the schoolhouse. He walked inside, looked quickly at all the pupils, at the windows, then at the door. He held a cap in his hand when he sat down on a back seat. He acted as if he were ready to run. My pupils were naturally excited when he came inside, and started looking at him. I motioned for them to look toward my desk and to keep quiet and pay no attention to Don Crump. The stray one had finally come because of his hunger and thirst. His was the eternal hunger and thirst of youth for laughter, play, recreation, association and enjoyment upon this earth. Don had come to us. We hadn't run him down, tied his hands and feet and brought him to us either. He had come of his own accord.

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3. gnarled \ˈnär(ə)ld\ twisted, knotted.