"M goin' to beat it, that's all," said Wickens. "I says to the sup—'m' mother's sick 'n she wants me an' he says 'G'wan with stuff like that, you ain't had a letter in a mont'. How do yuh know she's sick?"

"Well—how do yuh know?" asked Oochey, "if y'ain't had a letter?"

"That's just it." Wickens hitched his brown overalls, pulled at the ragged brim of his hat and spat a boyish mouthful of "swiped" tobacco. "If she wasn't sick she'd a wrote me. See?"

"Yeh. That's right, all right." Oochey understood exactly. Although he had no mother within memory, he knew as well as did most of the other boys in the industrial school that Wickens had and that she was his friend. But however much he appreciated the concern Wickens felt over the lapse in correspondence with his home, he was vaguely alarmed by the intention to "beat it."

"I suppose yuh think a lot of your mother?"

"Yeh, I sure do," answered Wickens. His pale blue eyes did not express emotion but his mouth was wistful.

"Have you got a father, too? I've got a father. He told me he was glad I was comin' here so I'd be off his hands." Oochey had almost forgotten that until this moment. Life in the school was sufficiently engrossing to wipe most memories away.

"My father—yeh, I got one. But he ain't like my mother—"

"Tenshun! 'D' grade," snapped the assistant superintendent, and the boys put shoulder to shoulder and adjusted themselves to the line.

It was a bright Nebraska morning. The "State industrial school" stands upon a noble hill and the boys in the long brown line could see straight across the valley to the shallow bed of the Platte where the river moved, sluggish and grey. They breathed the high air of the hill and worked in the open fields in the corn and potatoes. Cities and wickedness were far from them, except for the poisonous seeds in their minds which persisted sometimes even after years of the superintendent's "moral discipline."

Wickens communed with his plans. Other boys in the school had made the same sort of plans and had acted upon them. They had slipped away from the dormitories by night. Sometimes they came back without urging, weary and disheartened; sometimes they were caught after long and terrifying pursuit through the cornfields or along the river banks; sometimes they never came back. Once the superintendent had spent a morning lecture hour telling of a boy who had run away and had later been sent to the penitentiary. He
dwelt upon the evil of the boy’s conduct and magnified his punishment to the limits of horror. Such lectures had little effect upon Wickens and he continued, in spite of a vivid recollection of the other boy’s fate, to turn his idea over and over in his mind with the unctuous pleasure of a discoverer.

The captain of the grade, a swart little man, named Horton, who was fitted for his job only in being unfitted for anything else, came rapidly down the line, handing each boy a hoe. Wickens took his hoe automatically, dropping it into the groove in his shoulder where the strap of his overalls pressed down. His lithe little body was stiffened with the tremendousness of his thoughts. A certain mental quality which might have been called impulsiveness, or rather, the inheritance from a long line of ancestors who had loathed restraint, made Wickens sudden in action. He was planning his coup for immediate execution.

“For’ad march,” set the boys swinging down the hill through the thick yellow dust of the road, bound for the bottom lands. They liked the military effect of marching together in serried order. Their hoe handles, polished by the sweaty contact of hard little palms, shone in the sun like muskets, and their brown overalls and floppy hats were not so greatly unlike the khaki of the heroes.

Wickens, having decided upon his desertion and upon his methods, was not in line when, several drowsy hours later, the captain counted the boys. The sun had been hot and overpowering; perhaps the captain had dozed for a moment as they bent their backs over the potato rows.

“Where’s Wickens?” he demanded of Oochey.

“I dunno, sir,” answered Oochey, truthfully enough, although he trembled for fear some question might be put which he could not safely answer.

Wickens, on his stomach in a cornfield by the roadside, watched the little column moving up the hill, while Horton made a great show of anxiety and vigilance. The lost one lay in the dirt and chewed the soft end of a stalk of foxtail grass. The earth between the corn rows was baked and dry. A few yards away was a little irrigation ditch and here he crawled to splash muddy water on his heated face. He knew the alarm would be given and captains on horses would come swooping down from the hill, to hunt him like a beast in the corn. He had made his plans, however, and with confidence in fortune he curled up and went to sleep.

Speckled shade had become blackness when he awoke. The night was still parched with the windy September heat. The searchers and the horsemen who had threshed through that field during the
afternoon had missed him because he had chosen his corner close to
the road, and they had scarcely disturbed him with their pothrer.
Now one or two were still out with lanterns, but Wickens knew he
could move without being seen. He sat for a moment like a little
black shadow and then struck the road for town.

An hour later he lay close to the railroad track near the water
tank where the fast freights stopped. He was directly in the line of
the headlight flare of a big mogul engine as the “ten o’clock” slowed
down by the tank. The engineer saw the figure there and warned
the conductor. That official, bravely seconded by three or four
brakemen, hurried down the line of cars after the train had stopped,
looking murderously for the ’bo. The ’bo lay in a heap of coal dust
in the far corner of a gondola. When they put a light in his face
he moved his eyelids but held them shut.

“Aw, it’s only a kid,” said the conductor. He knew the brown
overall, denim-shirted uniform of the boys from “the hill.” He led
his cohorts away and Wickens went on, in thunderous grime, to the
city. Once there, he found his way through alleys and unkempt
streets to what had been a home.

It had not been homesickness prompting Wickens when he left
the school. Home had always been hideous except for mother, and
her misery had been evident to her son although he was not much
anguished, himself, over lack of food and filthy quarters. It had been
an intuitive impulse and it had been founded on a certainty.

His mother was sick. She looked up into the dirty, loving face
of her little boy and fainted dead away. Pain and disease had wasted
her strength but she had known that her son would come, somehow.
She lay on her cot and watched him in his small attempts at clean-
ing up the two rooms of the habitation. She said, finally, as if she
had been hesitating, “Your father will be glad to see you.”

“Is he here?” asked the boy, turning around with poised broom.

“He’s somewhere ’round. He’s been busy looking for work.”

The boy devoted himself to his sweeping and made no further
inquiries. The woman on the sick bed could feel the hostility that
bristled beneath his thin shoulder blades but she did not dispute the
matter with him. She, too, had reason for reproach; it was only the
arrival of the boy that had made these last few hours happy.

It was the fourth night, when Wickens was away for an hour to
get medicine at the Free Hospital, that she crossed her hands upon
her breast and did not waken.

Mercy of exhaustion and mercy of youthful healthfulness of spirit
saved the boy from despair. The unsympathetic public philanthrop-
ists who watch for such tragedies came and did their duties. They
took his mother away and Wickens waited, before going forth from her home, for what they had called the "fun’ral." He was sitting by the vacant, dishevelled cot the intervening night, when a squat figure lurched against the door and broke into the room.

"Hello, Kid."

The boy’s eyes, curiously dull, showed an apathetic recognition and then turned back to the cot. The elder Wickens moved unsteadily over toward him and reached out a hand toward the cot.

"Don’t you touch that!" the boy flung out the warning passionately. "She’s dead," he said after a moment.

His father was sobered out of bleary uncertainty and walked slowly across the room, away from him, and sat on a broken chair.

"That’s it," he said, "they’ve did me out of everything—and now m’woman’s gone."

He spoke to the boy as if to be ingratiating, "How’d yuh get out?"

"I didn’t get out," replied Wickens, as if the inquiry were improperly put, "I ain’t been in no jail. I come away, that’s all."

"Now you’re goin’ to help me, I s’pose. They’s a lot o’ things a likely kid like you c’n learn to do in my business."

"You ain’t got no business," said the boy suspiciously.

"Wha’d you know about it? I’m makin’ money every night."

"Every night? Why ain’t you makin’ money in the day time?"

"You ain’t got no call to be so particular."

The boy turned his face away from his father as if he had begun to feel a sacrilege in their conversation almost in the presence of death. "I’m goin’ back to the school," he said, "if yuh want to know where I’m goin’."

"You’re a little fool."

"M’ mother told me to go back and finish out m’ term."

"Now y’ve turned against your father, I suppose yuh might as well go back there wi’ the rest of ’em."

Wickens stood up and walked over toward his parent. "I ain’t turned against yuh," he said, chokily, "but I loved m’ mother an’ you never did."

His father muttered as if something had been suddenly revealed to him. He stood up and Wickens was close to his side. "Yes I did, Kid, yes I did," he said, half to himself. All the suddenly grown manhood left the child and he put his face against his father’s side, sobbing. For a moment they stood rocking back and forth and the father, still fumed with his liquor, felt the stab of his loss. The boy’s sobbing came to an end and, as his father sat down again upon the broken chair, he stood before him.

"I know I ain’t got no call to be particular, but I’ve got m’ work
cut out for me jus’ the same. She—said she wanted me to make a
good man out o’ m’self and I’m goin’ to.”

“Like me?” asked his father, fixing his son’s rapt little face with
the weak blue eyes which were part of the inheritance he had passed on.

“No,” answered Wickens stoutly, “you ain’t done it the way she
wanted yuh to.” Suddenly his face was bright with a newborn
hope. “Mebbe,” he said, “mebbe we could do it together.”

His father looked at him, utterly surprised. “Mebbe,” he con-
tinued, “you could get a good job, and I c’d go back to the hill and
get a lot o’ good time and come out in three years and you’d be
waitin’ f’r me an’—” he stopped breathlessly, and the light ebbed out
of his face as his father stared blankly.

New patience made the older man say, “What’s on your mind,
Kid? Mebbe it’ll work.”

“That’s what’d make her happiest, even if she did have to leave
me—an’ you.” The boy was beginning to get another rush of
enthusiasm. “Let’s make two men,” he urged, “you an’ me.
You’re older and you’ve got the start o’ me but I’d work hard to
catch up on yuh, when I got out of the school.”

“Kid, you’re a wonder,” said his father, with conviction. “You
make me feel more like behavin’ than a whole regiment o’ salvation
armies.” He studied the boy for a moment—his resolute little face
and his childish figure held so rigidly. “We’ll try it,” he said.
“We’ll try it, Kid. I’m all out o’ practice but between us I think
we can make one man in the fam’ly.”

The elder Wickens did not ask his son to tell him details of the
night before. They sat quietly for a time, the boy buried in the
silent misery of his grief, his father fighting against the remnant of
his drunkenness. He asked a question about the school and in a few
sentences his son tried to tell him why he wanted to go back and what
he could do at the school in fitting himself for a job. Finally
Wickens dropped asleep.

Somewhere near him he could hear his father’s heavy breathing,
when he opened his eyes in the black room a few hours later. He
could not determine at first whether his father had called him or
something else had broken his sleep. A knocking at the door drew
his attention. He listened again, decided that his father was still
asleep in the other corner of the room, and arose. He went quietly
to the door, without thinking that he might waken the man of the
house and shift responsibility for greeting the midnight caller. He
took no light and bent his ear to the door panel suspiciously.

“Wha’d’y want?” he asked in a low voice.
“WICKENS BEATS IT”

"Is Wickens there?"

He did not recognize the harsh growl of his visitor as any one from the school, but his first thought was that he had been followed and was to be dragged back as a refugee. However much that hurt his pride because it was an ignominious end to his flight, he was brave enough to accept it for an act of fate and he answered resolutely, "Yeh, this is him."

There was a sort of snarling laugh outside and he heard a whispered conference. Then the voice came again, "We ain't lookin' for no kid, we want Pardy Wickens. Is he here?"

Wickens knew then who they were and he answered, "No, he ain't here," and started away from the door. Luck was not with him, for his last answer had wakened his father, the "Pardy Wickens" whom these evil night spirits were seeking.

"Who's there?" he called.

"A couple o' bums you don' want to see," answered his son.

His father found the lamp and lit it, then came over to the door. "You can't see these guys, now," said his son. "They ain't the right kind."

"Hell, I can't," said his father, still half asleep. "Get out o' the way." He flung open the door. Two dark hulks were waiting there and one of them started forward with a profane complaint at being held out so long. As he started to cross the threshold he was confronted by a small but sturdy figure, personifying wrath.

"You ain't comin' in here," said the boy.

"What's eating you?"

"You never dared when m' mother was here, and now m' father's done with your whole bunch."

His father reached forward to drag him back. The boy held his ground until one of the men outside swung out and struck him a staggering blow in the face. The father was suddenly wakened from his stupidity. This blow in the face of his son stirred a feeling in him that had been almost dead. He started forward with dangerous menace toward the big man. "Bucky," he said, tensely, "I'll—"

The door slammed in his face, shutting out the intruders, and before it stood his son, who had moved quickly enough to avert the encounter. Now he confronted his angry father.

"Let that guy alone," said Wickens, "I don't mind gettin' wallopied once. All I want is f'r you to let them guys alone—f'r keeps."

His father's rage was overcome by a new emotion, the beginning of what might some day develop into fatherhood. He stared at his son until he understood and then held out his hand. The boy shook his hand, in solemn covenant for years to come.