A Day no Pigs Would Die

ROBERT NEWTON PECK

Chapter

I

I should of been in school that April day.

But instead I was up on the ridge near the old spar mine above our farm, whipping the gray trunk of a rock maple with a dead stick, and hating Edward Thatcher. During recess, he'd pointed at my clothes and made sport of them. Instead of tying into him, I'd turned tail and run off. And when Miss Malcolm rang the bell to call us back inside, I was halfway home.

Picking up a stone, I threw it into some bracken ferns, hard as I could. Someday that was how hard I was going to light into Edward Thatcher, and make him bleed like a stuck pig. I'd kick him from one end of Vermont to the other, and sorry him good. I'd teach him not to make fun of Shaker ways. He'd never show his face in the town of Learning, ever again. No, sir.

A painful noise made me whip my head around and jump at the same time. When I saw her, I knew she was in bad trouble.

It was the big Holstein cow, one of many, that belonged to our near neighbor, Mr. Tanner. This one he called "Apron" because she was mostly black, except for the white along her belly which went up her front and around her neck like a big clean apron. She was his biggest cow, Mr. Tanner told Papa, and his best milker. And he was fixing up to take her to Rutland Fair, come summer.

As I ran toward her, she made her dreadful noise again. I got close up and saw why. Her big body was pumping up and down, trying to have her calf. She'd fell down and there was blood on her foreleg, and her mouth was all thick and foamy with yellow-green spit. I tried to reach my hand out and pat her head; but she was wild-eyed mean, and making this breezy noise almost every breath.

Turning away from me, she showed me her swollen rump. Her tail was up and arched high, whipping through the air with every heave of her back. Sticking out of her was the head and one hoof of her calf. His head was so covered with blood and birthsop that I had no way telling he was alive or dead. Until I heard him bawl.

Apron went crashing through the puckerbush, me right behind. I'd never caught up. But because she

had to stop and strain, I got to the calf's head and got a purchase on him.

He was so covered with slime, and Apron was so wandering, there was no holding to it. Besides, being just twelve years old, I weighed a bit over a hundred pounds. Apron was comfortable over a thousand, and it wasn't much of a tug for her. As I went down, losing my grip on the calf's neck, her hoof caught my shinbone and it really smarted. The only thing that made me get up and give the whole idea another go was when he bawled again.

I'd just wound up running away from Edward Thatcher and running away from the schoolhouse. I was feathered if I was going to run away from one darn more thing.

I needed a rope. But there wasn't any, so I had to make one. It didn't have to be long, just strong.

Chasing old Apron through the next patch of prickers sure took some fun out of the whole business. I made my mistake of trying to take my trousers off as I ran. No good. So I sat down in the prickers, yanked 'em off over my boots, and caught up to Apron. After a few bad tries, I got one pantleg around her calf's head and knotted it snug.

"Calf," I said to him, "you stay up your ma's hindside and you're about to choke. So you might as well choke getting yourself born."

Whatever old Apron decided that I was doing to

*"WE'RE NOT RICH, PAPA."
"YES WE ARE, BOY. WE HAVE ONE
ANOTHER TO FEND TO, AND
THIS LAND TO TEND."*

WHEN young Rob Peck saves a neighbor's cow, the neighbor gives him a pig as a reward. Pinky is Rob's constant companion as he juggles backbreaking farm work with the schooling that is so important to his father. Pinky is a pet and a friend, but on a farm, every animal must have its use. And on a farm, even a boy must sometimes be a man. Will the support of a loving family and the plainspoken Shaker teachings of his father, Haven, be enough to see Rob thro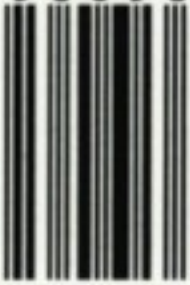ugh on the day no pigs would die?