Skyberia

RUSSELL KIRK

ON a cold autumn day, the sun hidden since early morning, two men were lost in Skyberia. Whatever new ragged ridge they sighted resembled every other; each conical sink-hole they struggled through seemed familiar yet menacingly unique. Their compass could not help them, for Clements and Robertson did not know what direction they ought to take; now and then the sky emitted a contemptuous sprinkle of snow, otherwise preserving its gray mask of a celestial caducity; and though several times they fired their rifles, they heard no other report in all those illimitable second-growth woods. Even the deer they were hunting never broke cover, so that Clements and Robertson told each other they were fools for leaving the pit-blind they had dug, to look for deer instead of shivering in their hole. As afternoon wore on, they heard a dog howling, howling far away through the jack-pines and tamaracks and cedars.

Skyberia, which has no precise frontiers, is a resurrected forest, in part the property of the state by virtue of delinquent-tax confiscations, in part a patchwork of abandoned or moribund farms over which the new scrub creeps slowly. A wood that has inched back from its grave has the look of Lazarus upon it. Clements and Robertson, who knew nothing of wild country, thought a bee-line the quickest route, and therefore repeatedly left the ridges and fought across the sink-holes, sometimes slipping ankle-deep in ooze and getting thoroughly scared.

And the sky watched them from behind the gray and drooped lids of its eyes. Blue or gray or black, the sky watched whatever living things ventured into Skyberia. Smokeless,

and empty, forever popping out unexpectedly from behind a pine-veiled ridge, the sky lords it over Skyberia; in few other corners of the world is it so tyrannical. An ironic old man in Bear City, who knew these woods as well as anyone did, had clapped the 'Skyberia' to them, and the name stuck. Under this sneeringly vigilant sky, Clements and Robertson stood bewildered and listened to the distant dog howl.

Clements sold used cars in Cleveland; Robertson had a sinecure in the highway department. Either, in his secret heart, would have preferred watching football over his television-set to this wet and chill plodding through shadow-land. Yet an uncomfortable compulsion to show their manliness impelled them each autumn into the northern woods, where the bucks as regularly eluded them. They wore high-laced engineers' boots, exhausting for long tramps; their shoulders ached under the weight of their mackinaws; they would have liked to throw their guns into the swamp. The dog howled on; and after conferring, Clements and Robertson resumed their bee-line course toward the howl. For all the cold, they were sweating when they found the dog.

An oasis in Skyberia, fifteen or twenty cleared acres, formed a gulf in the woods. A mud track ran down to the far side of this pasture, and rusty barbed wire, strung eccentrically to uprooted stumps, had kept the deer out, more or less, and the cattle in. But now there was no need for a fence. The tar-paper shanty which stood on the northern edge of the field was deserted, they could see: the door open, the chimney smokeless. A privy and a shed and the wreck of a chicken-coop—these were all the buildings of this Skyberian farm. Big and black, half collie, half Lord knew what, the dog sat beside the door and howled, his head turned away from Clements and Robertson.

"What's he up to?" asked Robertson, edgily.

"Towse doesn't forget in a hurry." A slow, rather harsh voice said this, out of nowhere, and Clements and Robertson swung about with a common start. In the shadow of the chicken-house a man was standing, one foot on an old crate; he must have been watching them as they approached the clearing. Tall, lean, somewhat stooped, he inspected them out of large blue eyes. His hair, showing beneath a Scotch cap, was bushy and reddish; deep lines, set in a rather whimsical expression, ran sharply down his tanned face on either side of his mouth; he wore an old field-jacket and blue denims. Seeing him apparently amiable, Clements and Robertson had hopes of getting back to their tourist cabin outside Bear City that night.

"Say!" Clements began. "This your place, friend? I hope we're not trespassing. We didn't see any signs up."

"No, not mine." The tall man—somewhere about fifty years old, perhaps—came into the deserted yard. "This was the Hallecks' house, but a couple of weeks ago they finally stopped trying to make ends meet. They gave Towse to me then, but every other day or so he trots back here, and I have to fetch him. It's a cold sight, eh? The door swings open, the squirrels go in and out of the window, and the black dog is master of all he surveys."

Clements and Robertson looked at the tall man uneasily.

"Does that come from Kipling?" asked Robertson, intending to be polite.

"It comes from Williams, far as I know", the tall man told him, placidly. "Samuel Williams is my name. Tom!" He shouted toward the woods beyond the faint trail; a small boy came loping. "That's my son, Tom." Williams glanced wryly at their boots. "Been out a good many hours?"

"Ever since nine", said Clements, fervidly. "We've rented a cabin close to town. Left our car on the other side of the ridges."

"You could stand some coffee. Come along, and after we stop at my place, I'll take you back to your car, or close to it." Williams took the reluctant Towse by the scruff of the neck, and set out along the vestige of a road, Tom silent beside him; Clements and Robertson, aching at every joint, tried to match his stride.

Samuel Williams seemed content to be silent; Clements, uncomfortable in the stillness of the decayed road, dimly longing for the noise of traffic and the smell of gasoline and the demanding bumble of voices that made the stuff of his normal existence, wanted very much to talk. But though volubility was his vocation, for the first time in his life he was unsure how to begin. What did people back in these sticks talk about? They would not have television sets, so television programmes were out; the fact that for a long time, obviously, no motor-car had forced its way along this trail somehow discouraged mention of an interest almost universal, the automobile-market; and he rather doubted whether this weather-ravaged man ever kept up with college football. Clements reverted, without preliminaries, to the subject really at the back of his mind, and asked: "What do you folks do in these parts, Mr. Williams?"

Williams hesitated, as though uncertain what was meant by the question. "You mean how we get along? It's a bit of this and a bit of that. A few acres of corn, some potatoes and beans and pickles, half-a-dozen steers run in the woods and grained in the winter, a couple of cows, the chickens—there's most of it. Apple-trees and peaches, too. Plenty of blackberries and huckleberries in the woods, fish enough in the lakes, and a little venison one time or another." Here

he seemed inclined to wink, but thought better of it. "The elevator in town takes the beans and pickles; that accounts for most of the cash. We need more cash than my father and his folks did, of course. They made their clothes and they never bought canned goods; they were close people, really close, but they never borrowed. They lived in a farmer's world, Mister, and we live in a city man's world. And how about you?"

Robertson explained who they were; Williams only nodded. Towse, docile now, trotted ahead; Tom surreptitiously inspected the two strangers with the extreme shyness of old-fashioned children, a juvenile phenomenon unfamiliar and disturbing to Clements and Robertson. A rabbit, hardly shyer, dodged across the track. "Have you any other kids, Mr. Williams?" said Robertson, loudly, as if he were in his office. "Williams!" sighed an echo from the ridge which the road now paralleled. Clements started a trifle; he did not really like Nature, he confessed to himself.

"Three others, all a good deal older than Tom", Williams answered. "Rachel's the nearest; she got married last year and went to Cleveland. The girls all go: they see the movies and then can't stand the country. They think happiness is a kind of gear in a machine,—all you have to do is shift, and you'll be happy. And there's Andrew. He's a machinist at Oldsmobile, and comes home once or twice a year. They get a dollar sixty-five an hour, in his department, which seems pretty nice to them. But after rent and income-tax and social security and payments on his car and what it takes to live in the city, what does Andrew get that his dad doesn't? Yet they don't see it; they'll live in the smoke and the noise and the mess of last week's Sunday papers and a couple of babies in a pre-fab, as long as wages hold out. They don't see it. They tell me that with a city job, you don't have to

face the weather and you don't have to face a lonely winter." Here he fell silent, with a grimace.

"Did you say there were four, altogether?" Clements asked.

"With Ed, yes", said Williams. "Probably Ed would have stuck; he had grit; but south of Florence a land-mine took off both his legs. They don't come back whole, not the farmers and the farmer's sons. They're the fellows who need arms and legs most, but they don't bring them back with them. Because they're used to rough life and used to handling guns, the army puts them in the infantry, right off. Some don't come back whole, some just don't come back. You'd think, from the casualty rate, that the people who run the cities decided that whatever country boys they didn't seem able to tempt off the farm or starve off the farm, they'd bury. Not a really young man left in this whole township, now. Ed might have stuck. Well, Tom's got some spunk in him: he may stay out of the factory." He gave the boy a nod; Tom retreated behind the big dog. "And here's my place now, gentlemen."

This gap in Skyberia was appreciably larger than the desolate Halleck farm; and the house was no shanty, but a long, tight cabin of squared logs, neat though old, with kitchen and woodshed tacked solidly to the rear of it. As they approached, a stout woman came out of the door, with some hesitation, straightening her apron. "My wife Alice", said Williams, introducing Clements and Robertson. She seemed entirely good-humoured at this appearance of guests, promised a bit of supper and withdrew into the kitchen. Clements and Robertson took chairs by the black iron stove and eyed the room while they talked with Williams. The interior surface of the logs was plastered, so that the cabin was warm; but it was very simple. Worn blue linoleum on the floor, three or four straight

chairs, a re-covered sofa, an old easy chair, a plain square table, a desk, a china-cabinet, and a top-heavy bookcase—this was nearly all the furniture. Curtains made of dyed army blankets hung in two small doorways, the entrances to bedrooms. No radio, no electric light—for a big kerosene lamp was on the table—probably no running water.

"You've a cosy little place here", said Clements, a bit hypocritically. "Wish I had one like it to spend the summers in."

"Oh, it's a comfortable house for these parts", Williams answered. "My father made half the furniture. We keep warm. When the snow's deep, there's no getting to town, but Alice does a lot of fall canning and we stay here snug enough till the snow-plough from the county barns comes around, or there's a thaw."

"But you must be bored stiff", Robertson put in, with a kind of horror, thinking of endless winter nights, without company, without bridge or canasta, without radio or movies, without liquor or change of scene or the slightest alteration. He thought of the white woods all round, the sigh of the wind, the incessant, intolerable quiet.

A slow smile crossed Williams' gaunt face. "Why, I look forward to the winters. The chores don't let up, and there's wood to cut, but still a good deal of time's left over. Alice and Tom and I set in the kitchen and talk, or maybe I stretch out on the sofa with one of those." He pointed a thumb toward the massive oak bookcase. "Some were Dad's, and some were Ed's—Ed was deep, a deep boy, and quick besides—and some I picked up. I hear nobody reads down your way, these days—too busy, too much television."

"I tackled *The Big Fisherman* last Christmas", said Clements, politely. "But when you're in business . . ." He moved to the bookcase. "Say, this is serious stuff: *Rise of*

the Dutch Republic, by Motley; *The Virginians*, by William Makepeace Thackeray; *Ayesha*, by Rider Haggard; *Essays*, by Emerson; *Plutarch's Lives*. And you've got a big Bible here. You read all these books?"

"Most", said Williams. "I'm a slow reader, though. What's the hurry? If I kept at it till Doomsday, I'd never be half as smart as Ed. Some of Ed's books are hard sledding for an old hand like me, but now and then I feel as if I ought to have a look at them because Ed can't. I've taken to reading the Bible, too, after all these years. Ordinarily it's too long a trip to town to make church on Sunday, and the church at New Salem Corners, that was closer, burned three years ago; anyway, there hadn't been a minister for ten years before, there weren't enough of us left around here to pay him. But I've been reading the Bible out loud to Alice and Tom, some time now. Don't get nervous; I'm not one of those 'Jesus Saves' folks. But in the past three or four years, I've started to understand why God is terrible. You and I and everybody else know, deep down, that our world is going to smash. And I'm thinking that God wants it to smash. He wants it to smash because He's terrible. And He's terrible because he loves us."

Clements and Robertson were feeling that profound embarrassment that engulfs moderns trapped into hearing a confession of faith. "I go to the First Baptist quite often . . . " said Robertson, feebly defensive.

"He's terrible because he wants us to be human", Williams went on. "He loves us because we're human. But we've been trying to make ourselves inhuman, and that's why He's going to let this age smash. He's going to make us start being human again. The cities . . . "

Here, however, Mrs. Williams brought in the supper, and her husband pulled up chairs for Clements and Robert-

son. It was clear that the Williamses seldom had company, for there were not cups enough to go round: Tom and Mrs. Williams drank their coffee out of bowls. "Hey, bluegills!" Robertson remarked cordially. A big platter of the fish, and a dish of baked potatoes, and home-made bread, and home-canned peaches—this was their meal, everything decently cooked. Clements and Robertson did justice to it. Temporarily, indeed, the food made them almost at ease in Skyberia; they could even imagine themselves living on bluegills in the woods indefinitely.

'I don't see why you don't have more neighbours", said Clements, helping himself to more peaches, "seeing you live so well. Anyone moved away recently besides the Hallecks?"

"A dozen years ago", Mrs. Williams said, "there were eight or ten families through here. Now we're the last left. The church is gone, the school's gone, the store's gone. In the whole township there are just seventeen registered voters, and fewer still in the next township. And the more that go away, the harder it is for those that stay."

Robertson said he could not understand why. "I thought the government was helping you farmers."

Williams' sarcastic grin interrupted him. "You're thinking of the big fellows, the wheat men and the cotton men and the cattle men. Not us fellows, not us fools who eat what we raise. They pay the big fellows by taking the difference out of our hides. It's the same way with everything. They closed down our little school before Tom was old enough to go, and told us we'd have to send our kids to the consolidated school at Bear City—the bus would come for them. But if you have to send your children across half the county to a school you've no say in—why, you might as well live in the city, eh? Anyway, that's what a lot of folks thought, and they're in the city now. And the people that run the cities

are thinking up ways of dealing with stubborn codgers like yours truly. Well, if you want to get to your cabin to-night, I suppose we'd best get started."

While Clements and Robertson pulled on their coats beside the stove, Williams and his boy got out their team and waggon. Mrs. Williams brought blankets to wrap round their legs. "We used to have a Model T", she said, "but even it began to wear out, and parts got harder to find, and the new cars don't get many miles to the gallon. Sam says that's a good sign: the factories are slipping. So we stick to the waggon and do well enough; but I hope you can stand the cold."

They bade her goodbye, with effusive thanks, and then Williams, with Tom on the seat beside him, shook the reins, and they bumped down the dim road, the dark of the forest heavy upon them, for it was now long past sundown. After nearly an hour's tedious ride, they began to enter country which, despite the darkness, seemed less unfamiliar to Clements and Robertson. "We'll find that car of yours any minute now", said Williams.

"How long are you going to stick it around here, Mr. Williams?" Clements asked.

"Well, sir", said Williams, "I know now that I'm going to stick it out as long as I live; and so is Tom probably. Five years ago—two or three years ago—I wouldn't have given a plugged nickel for our chances of holding out. But you remember what I said about God being terrible. Not long past I was certain, sure as Hell's a mantrap, that the game was up for little fellows like me. The government, the chain-stores, the consolidated schools, the factories, the army, the movies, the radio, and Old Man Arithmetic had our number. But now I know I was wrong: because God is terrible, and

He loves men, and He's going to keep men human. He's not going to let us copy ants. He's not going to turn us over to the generals and the planners and the social workers. He's going to burn us and He's going to starve us, but He'll keep us men. No, Tom and I will be here when nearly everything else has gone to blue blazes."

Now some big dark object blocked the road: Williams swung his lantern toward it, and it turned into Clements' Buick. Clements and Robertson scrambled awkwardly down from the waggon, shuffled their feet in the half-inch of snow that lay on the ground, thanked Williams again, offered him a five-dollar bill which he would not take, and presently warmed up the Buick. While the motor ran, Williams stood by the car door; and Robertson asked him, suddenly, with a nervous laugh, "What'll you sell your place for?"

"I'll never sell, by the Almighty", declared Williams. "Time was when I'd have sold for a thousand dollars; time was when I'd have sold for five hundred dollars. Why, I believe there was a time when, if you'd offered me a good steady job in town, I'd have given you the place for nothing. But not now, or ever again. I thank God He put me in Skyberia. There's a time coming when people in the cities will look for rats and cats to eat, and there'll be none. Or if they don't starve, or burn, then the city people will be like soft machines, that have to be fed and watched and replaced; they won't be *men*; they'll be things that take and take, but never give. Things like that don't last long. But Skyberia will be here when the rest of the world has eaten itself up; and we'll still be people, here in Skyberia, not ants or rabbits."

"What about guys like Robertson here and me, when blue blazes come?" Clements asked him, trying to smile.

Williams removed his Scotch cap, tucked it in his belt, drew off his right glove, and shook hands with Clements and

Robertson. "Good night, gentlemen." He said this and nothing more; and as the Buick rolled toward Bear City, he stood silent in the cold, watching them vanish into the world of progress that lies beyond Skyberia.

Presently Williams put his cap on, climbed upon the waggon beside little Tom, and urged his team back along the road. They had gone hardly a hundred rods when the lantern light flashed upon some scrap of metal lying between the ruts—a chunk of iron, fallen from a truck or farm machine. Samuel Williams reined in his horses. "Jump down, Tom", he said, gently, "and get us that thing. From now on, we'll need to save scraps." This done, they made again for home, the snow and stumps and second growth of Skyberia closing behind them like the doors of Ali Baba's cavern.