THE INDIANA HOME

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FOREWORD

In memory of Dr. Logan Esarey, late Professor of History at Indiana University, who devoted most of his life to the study, teaching and writing of Indiana history, these essays on Indiana life are published. In rough draft they were found among his very miscellaneous notes and papers. They were never intended for publication but merely as outlines from which he read to college and historical groups. Although prepared primarily for young folks—his students and grandchildren—they were enjoyed quite as much by those whose years provided memories of earlier days in Indiana. In the editing no important changes have been made in the informal language of the author—the homely language of the pioneer.

Publication of this little volume was made possible through the interest of Mrs. Logan Esarey, the Indiana Historical Society, members of the Indiana Historical Society, colleagues, friends and former students. The dedication is as Dr. Esarey would have wished it.

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CHAPTER SIX

A TALE OR TWO

THE BEWITCHING OF BLACKSTOCK

This story has no particular significance except that it contains in fairly good form one of the old pioneer superstitions. It has come down through the family for more than a century, and of course, has many variations and details. The Esarey family—consisting of John, his wife, Hester, and a considerable family of grown sons and daughters, some married, but mostly single—was crowded out of the Elizabethtown neighborhood early in the nineteenth century. The old hunter John had served under Clark and received a considerable land grant from Virginia, to which he had added two or three thousand acres on a little stream called Doe Run, a western branch of Salt River. Through some difficulty with speculators from Philadelphia, he lost his land and whatever property he had went to pay his attorneys. So some time prior to 1806 the family, with all the family goods—a young saddle mare, which Hester had evidently salvaged from a herd of fifteen or twenty, and such

household utensils as they could carry—started for Indiana Territory.

Most probably they crossed the Ohio River on what later, if not then, was Borer's Ferry on the east side of what is now Perry County. The evidence is sufficient that they crossed the river in March and located in a little valley at the head of Oil Creek. Whether they had previously ever visited this locality or not we do not know. John had hunted over in these parts many times and perhaps had visited this place. Five considerable branches which they called creeks, come together here almost at the same place, forming Oil Creek. The main stream had cut a gorge through the hills to the south some six hundred feet deep and flowed through it about seven miles to the Ohio River at Derby. In the little valley there were perhaps one hundred acres of fairly level land. Four or five large springs flowed from the limestone rock at the base of the hills. Near one of these springs where there was an open meadow of wet grassy land, perhaps two acres, John and Hester and the remainder of the tribe—at least three grown sons among them—built a log cabin, cleared some patches of land and during the summer (probably of 1806) raised a sufficient crop of corn, potatoes, beans and other such truck. There was no shortage of things to eat in the ensuing winter. Now for the story.

It seems that this was a cold, snowy winter. The older persons who told the story have always referred to it as "the cold winter" or "the winter of the deep snow." But there

were so many of those in pioneer times that we cannot be very sure just which year it was. It seems that the snows began to fall along toward the middle of December, and one after another accumulated to a depth of eight or ten inches in the big surrounding forests. In due course of time the wild animals "housed up" and the deer became too poor to make good meat. The family had plenty of cured venison and bear meat. It was not a question of saving the children from starvation or anything of the kind, but evidently old John the Hunter got tired of watching the fire burn on the fireplace and decided to take a little hunt. It was evidently well along in March. The returning sun had melted the snow off of the open places and the southern slopes. These places were called glades and were generally four or five acres in extent, without timber, but covered with a species of grass somewhat like that of the northwest plains, and a rather rank growth of wild pea vines—though the deep snow had beaten these down. A light snow the previous day had obliterated the game trails in the forests but had not covered the grass and pea vines in the glades. So John decided to make the rounds of a few of these glades on the slopes of Oil Creek on the south.

On the following day John and Hester were up as usual, perhaps at daylight, and had some kind of a breakfast, and when the first rays of the sun showed over Clipper Hill to the east, John took down the old rifle gun and headed away toward the west. He proceeded west of what for half a

century was known as Esarey Creek, to a low gap in the cliff to the south. According to the story (which greatly exaggerated distances) he went about a mile. As a matter of fact the only gap where he could turn to the left and get out of the valley is just about one-eighth of a mile from the place where his cabin stood. He turned to the south then and climbed the Reily Ridge. I am using the names I am familiar with. Of course these names were not in use at the time. This ridge was about six hundred feet above the valley and the distance as he climbed it was nearly a mile.

The snow on this northern slope was evidently ten to twelve inches deep. When he reached the crest of the hill he followed the eastern rim around to the south half a mile or so to a considerable glade which still shone in the forest. There were no signs of deer. It was his hope that he would find a yearling buck. Most of such animals were in fair condition and one of them would make a good variation in their meals. However, he dropped down into the Ollinger Hollow and passed within a few yards of the place where another of my great-grandfathers, John Ewing, built a cabin a year or so later. Ollinger Creek, as were all the others of which we speak, was locked up in ice and covered neatly with the general blanket of snow.

Hunter John crossed to the south, up a steep gulch to the top of what is now known as Bodard Hill. He was keeping close to the east rim so that he could see over the slope beneath him and out across the valley, if perchance any deer

were moving. The old story now has him six miles from home. As a matter of fact, except for the timber, he would have been in plain sight of his cabin, less than a mile away. But I have an idea that if one of us should travel over his path we would agree he was fully six miles from home.

Finding no trace of deer, he pursued his way along the slope down into the Konold Hollow. He crossed the branch half a mile from where it enters Oil Creek and went a short distance, perhaps one hundred yards, up the opposite hill-side. There, before he had realized what he was doing, he had crossed the trail of two other hunters, who had come up the main valley from the south and turned to the west. These he knew were from a small settlement of refugees living down toward the mouth of Oil Creek.

He had evidently met some of these men before. They were from a settlement of men and women who had come west with Aaron Burr and had reached Clarksville when the President's proclamation had denounced the whole business as treason and the parties as traitors. Thoroughly frightened, this little group had fled off down the river and landed a mile or so off the mouth of Oil Creek and built some cabins in the hawthorn thicket. Many of their descendants are now respectable citizens of Perry County. It may be observed by the modern reader that it was the duty of any good citizen crossing the trail of a traitor to arrest him and turn him over to the nearest officer. But since the nearest sheriff was over at Vincennes, the idea did not appeal to the hunter, so he

turned to the east, crossed main Oil Creek about where the Frakes settled two or three years later, climbed the eastern hill high enough so that he could scan the main creek bottom and then turned north toward home. A half or three-quarters of a mile brought him to Phiggin's Creek. Near the base of the hill between Phiggin's Creek and main Oil was one of the most attractive glades to be found in the whole region.

Skirting the lower edge of this glade and the eastern side were a number of large elm trees, growing in and out of the limestone ledge at the base of the hill. The sun by this time was about on the meridian and the old hunter slowly climbed up on some of the roots of the large elm, leaned the rifle up against the tree on his left side and proceeded to make himself comfortable in the midday sun. He opened his hunting coat and took out a good-sized pone of corn bread which he slowly ate. He then took a leathern bottle of water, containing perhaps a pint, from a string around his neck and proceeded to drink its contents. As was the custom of these old hunters, he carried one such drink of water which he drank after his noon meal and never drank from any spring or branch.

Dinner over, Hunter John proceeded to drowse in the warm sun with a weather eye on the glade. In a short time the heads of two deer, a young buck and his mate, showed on the west side over the crest of the glade. Slowly the deer approached their feeding ground. The big buck took a nip of grass occasionally and surveyed the surroundings care-

fully. In what would seem to us a very considerable time they had approached the center of the glade. That was the safest place for them to browse, for a skulking wolf or sleeping panther could not approach so closely but that the young deer would have at least two jumps start—and with that they were usually able to take care of themselves.

All this time the hunter had not so much as moved a finger, knowing that if he changed the position of even his hand it might be observed by the young buck. But when the deer was entirely satisfied that everything was all right, the hunter's left hand slowly moved out, grasped the rifle at its balance and slowly brought it into position. The gun was on his left side, but it made no difference for the hunter shot indifferently from either shoulder. The rifle was in line, the trigger set, the bead dead on the target. Then came a faint flash of fire from the muzzle, followed by the smallest possible wisp of smoke. Ordinarily the result would have been a perfectly dead deer.

In this case, both deer bounded into the air, as was to be expected, but instead of one of them falling limp in his tracks, both were gone over the hill and into the woods in much less time than a split second. The old hunter sat there momentarily with the rifle still in his hand, got up slowly and walked over to the place where the deer had been. There was no drop of blood in sight anywhere. He held the breech of his rifle up toward the sun. The light shone through perfectly and everything seemed normal except

that there was no deer. At that distance, thirty or forty yards, and under the circumstances there was no question about where the bullet should have gone. Something was wrong and he had a very strong suspicion that he knew what. Quietly tying the string around his coat at the belt he started to load the rifle and then stopped and threw it casually on his shoulder and started up the hill for home. The hunt was over. For no hunter in those days carried his rifle on his shoulder but always in the hollow of his arm while hunting.

It was a long tedious walk, up hill practically all of the way; a mile or so to the crest of the ridge which we know as the Clell Walker Hill, then down the range line along the west side of what was later the Walker farm, across Oil Creek at the Broad Ripple over to the path at the bottom of the hill, thence west a short distance to his cabin.

Up to this point he had not indicated that he was approaching home at all. Ordinarily he gave a signal when he was a mile or so away so that there would be no mistake about his identity. The old story has it that he walked inside the cabin and instead of placing the rifle where it belonged in the rack over the door, he set it down in the corner just as if it had been an ordinary hunting piece and never spoke a word to anyone. This can hardly be believed in the light of the remainder of the story. Capable as was Grandmother Easter or Esther or Hester (she signed her name all three ways) she otherwise could not have known what had happened. So evidently John must have acquainted her with

the circumstances. But after that neither he nor she spoke to anyone directly, very much to the amusement of the three smaller children.

After supper John lost little time in going to bed and we can easily believe was soon asleep. Whatever happened to these old pioneers they generally did very little worrying. The children and the other grown folks were likewise soon asleep. Hester sat down before the fireplace and mused over the situation for half an hour. She then got up slowly, picked up the rifle which she used indifferently well on such small game as squirrels and turkeys. She wondered whether it would ever be of any use again. The loss of a rifle under the circumstances was a far more serious matter than it would be today. There was no gunsmith closer than Louisville and even there perhaps none that could solve this problem. She held the breech of the rifle out toward the lighted fire, glanced down the barrel to see that it was clear, and put it back where she got it.

Incidentally, this rifle was an heirloom in the family. The barrel was some six inches longer than ordinary; the bore was about halfway between that of the ordinary deer rifle and the bear gun—which also served for hunting Indians. It seems that either Old John or his oldest son, Jonathan Davis, had had this rifle made to order in Philadelphia. The stock was of black walnut and extended to the end of the barrel. The thimbles were either silver or trimmed with silver, and a number of crescents and stars likewise of silver

adorned it in various places. The stock had been highly polished by rubbing with the sweaty palm of the hand until it looked and glistened like mahogany. Although not carrying as far as the larger rifle, it was deadly accurate up to a hundred yards.

Hester went back to the edge of the bed, stooped over and pulled from under it a small box. Such boxes were known proverbially as "chists" among the early settlers. This was the family "chist." She slowly opened it, searched around in one corner and brought out a little wallet of silver pieces, perhaps Spanish money. She selected one about the proper size to mold into a bullet and then set the "chist" down again. She then went to the rack where the rifle ordinarily hung, took down the ladle and the bullet molds, turned the ladle upside down over the blaze so that everything was burned out clean, rubbed the silver piece clean, dropped it into the ladle and put it on the coals to melt. She then opened the mold, brushed the bullet chamber out carefully, locked it again and set it down level on the hearth rock. In a little while the silver piece melted down. She poured a nice round bullet without any stem to it, and held the mold in her hand until she was sure it was cool. When it was entirely cold she opened the mold and saw that the bullet was all right. She then took down the shot pouch with the powder horn attached, slung it over her shoulder, picked up the beautiful rifle and glanced with satisfaction at her image

in the family mirror. She was not a vain woman but perhaps she just imagined she was Diana. She dried her hands carefully, poured out a charge of powder in her left hand, put a small part of it back so that it was a light charge, and poured the balance down the rifle barrel. She had evidently overlooked a point for she sat quietly a minute or so. Setting the rifle down carefully, she went back to the "chist," pulled out a rather beautiful dress, evidently her wedding dress, either of silk or satin, fingered around until she found a ruffle with some goods to spare, cut off a piece of it about three-fourths of an inch square, spread it over the bore of the rifle and placed the silver bullet in position. She took out the ramrod, of course, and put the bullet down on the charge of powder. She threw the rifle to her shoulder a time or two, sighted and killed a few imaginary turkeys, Indians or some such varmints, and then replaced it where it belonged on the rack. She put away the chest, hung up the ladle, shot pouch and bullet mold and, when everything was in its place again, went off to bed.

If the old story is correct Hunter John was sleeping quietly all this time.

At the usual time in the morning Hester arose, prepared breakfast as if nothing in the world was going on beyond the fixed monotony of sitting out the days and sleeping out the nights. John was ready and when the first ray of sun shone over the hills to the east, apparently without asking a

question or without even looking to see whether the rifle was loaded, threw "Blackstock," the rifle, into the hollow of his left arm and took the trail.

Whether from prudence, easy walking, or because it was a part of the requirement, he followed his trail of the day before, step by step, so that no one crossing the trail would ever know that one man had been over it twice. He arrived at the mouth of Phiggin's Creek about the same time as the day previous, crawled up on the same elm root, set Blackstock down by the side of him, still on his left side, ate his pone of bread, drank his pint of water, shut his eyes—all except the southwest corner of one of them which remained open. You may imagine the hunter's eyes were tired by this time, having been out in the blinding sun and the dazzling snow for five or six hours. He then proceeded to drowse.

In due course of time the two deer heads appeared as before, and the deer acted as before. The hunter repeated his actions of the preceding day. He leveled his rifle from the same shoulder as before, touched the trigger with the same finger, and the young buck jumped just as he had the day before, but his mate ran off alone. The young buck had fallen dead in his tracks.

If this story had a climax it is right here. The hunter should have walked briskly to the fallen deer, jerked its head around down the hill and stuck his hunting knife either into the deer's heart or cut a big vein or artery so that the blood would all run out. In this case, he sat perfectly quiet

for a very short time and then set his gun down and walked out and tended to his quarry.

The rest of this story is brief. He took a thong from the inside of his coat, tied the deer's four feet together, reloaded his rifle—for there was now a smell of blood about the hunter and there might be hungry wolves anywhere along the road—slung the deer over his shoulder and started home. But nothing happened. He followed his trail to the top of the hill and across to the rim of Walker Hill where he gave the customary yell. This not only apprised Hester of his success and released her from her dumbness, but brought his two favorite deerhounds to him in a very short time.

We have no details of what happened next except that the hunter threw the deer down and Hester hung it up and I presume someone of the grown sons jerked off the skin and the family had some fresh venison steaks. There is a tradition that the young children, evidently about five, seven and nine years old, got quite a lot of fun out of the day, since their mother was not permitted to talk to them. One of their regular chores was to water the mare—the gentle riding mare that had been trained for family use. The oldest child it seems was able to reach her forelock, but could not put the bridle on. So the little girl would lead her up to the cabin door and the mother would put the bridle on and the three young huskies would climb on and ride her all the way to the place where the spring branch ran into the creek, a total distance of perhaps two hundred feet. There was some open

water which she could drink, and then she was released. Finding the mother could not say yes or no or any other word, the children found it convenient to water the mare every few minutes. But we have no word that they were ever later scolded for it.

So ends the story of Blackstock, the bewitched rifle.

It was rumored that Old John, himself, never took much stock in this story. His version was much less interesting and, if you do not believe in superstitions, it is probably the one you should accept. According to his account, he had merely gone to sleep sitting there against the tree and dreamed of the deer. At the time of being awakened by the sun in his eyes the two deer had jumped up into the sky, grown smaller and smaller, and never came down again. The next day, then, he had gone back to the same place and shot a real deer.