

## His Father's Boots

by Charles Land



Jody felt the heat of the sun as it beat against his face. Now the wind was rising. He had been waiting all afternoon for his father to return.

Once more, Jody searched the distant hills. There was no sign of life. He did hear the hollow sound of a rattlesnake. They, too, were coming out of the hills in search of water. Jody had promised his mother that he would return before sundown. He headed his pony toward home.

That morning, Jody's father had left their ranch in Texas. He had gone to Grandfather's house in Mexico for help. The long drought had wiped out their cattle. And now the well had gone dry.

The family had been torn apart by the Civil War. Grandfather was on the side of the Confederacy. His son believed in the Union side. It was true that Jody's father had gone to Grandfather for help. But it was also a mission of peace. It was a search for kindness and for understanding. Grandfather



had said he would never forgive his son. Grandfather had said that a man who fought for the Union was no son of his.

A low golden cloud hung above the endless miles of hard, dry earth. Their white ranch house and water tank stood alone under the cloud. The windmill seemed painted against the sky.

When Jody arrived home, his mother and his older brother, Ben, were waiting at the gate. Ben was 16, nearly a man.

"Pa didn't come back," Jody said.

He looked at his mother's tired face. She tried to smile. Then she fingered her apron nervously.

"It's a good sign," she said. "He's probably staying the night. Come on, boys. Take care of your pony while I get us a bite to eat."

Their meal of chili beans and pan bread was nearly over when they

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heard a whinny. Jody knew it was Pa's horse. It had to be. Jody was the first to reach the front door. He was the first to see his father's lifeless body bent low over the saddle.

Ben and Jody worked together. But the dead weight was almost too much for them.

His mother sobbed. "Grandfather's shot him! That old man has shot him!"

But they found no gun wounds on the body.

Jody heard his mother's voice. The sobs were gone. Her voice was soft, but it showed strength. She put her hands on Ben's shoulders.

"You are the head of this outfit now, Ben. You will wear your father's boots. Tomorrow you will go to your grandfather. You will tell him what has happened because of this quarrel."

His father's boots! Jody suddenly felt the full force of the **tragedy**. His father's beautiful boots! They were made by one of the great boot makers of El Paso. They were his father's one splendid pride.

The boys spent hours digging their father's grave. The fresh mound needed only a cross. Jody would make one and place it there the next day.

At dawn, Jody helped Ben put on the boots. "They're a tight fit," said Jody. "Your feet are bigger than Pa's."

Ben stood up and stomped about in the boots. "I'm not afraid of Grandpa," Ben said. "I'll face him down. I don't know who killed Pa. But Grandpa's responsible. Ma says so."

"Ma can't be right, and you know it," Jody said. "Grandpa wouldn't kill his own son."

Ben stared at his brother. "You always did stick up for Grandpa!" said Ben.

Jody and Ma stood at the gate. They watched as Ben rode out across the sand. It was the longest morning of Jody's life. He made a cross from some cedar boards. The carving on the cross took the most time—Pa's name and the two dates.

Jody tried to keep Ma's mind off the quarrel. But it seemed to be all she could think about. This bitterness—the Civil War—had torn a nation

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apart. It could easily destroy a family. But surely Ben would be able to get Grandfather to help and to understand. Difficult as the old man sometimes was, Jody knew that Grandpa loved his grandsons.

Jody was at the corral later when he heard his mother's scream. He leaped over the fence and rushed across the sand to the house. Ma was trying to drag Ben from the saddle of his father's horse.

"He's killed him!" she cried.

But again, there were no gun wounds on the body.

"You're the man now," Ma said. "You will wear your father's boots."

Jody knew that the coming of manhood is not always determined by a boy's age. It did not matter whether the symbol was a crown or a pair of boots. He was not a man. He was not ready to wear the boots yet.

Jody pulled the boots from Ben's feet. His mother watched with grief-filled eyes. He tied the boots backward in the stirrups of his father's riderless horse.

"Have you gone mad?" said Ma. "What are you doing?"

"Grandpa will know I come in peace when he sees me leading Pa's riderless horse with his empty boots."

"It'll be your funeral, Jody! Pa's dead and buried. And Ben's dead, too. Your grandfather killed them."

"Ma, I don't believe it."

"He'll kill you, too."

Jody slowly led his mother into the house. He sat her in a high-backed rocker. The cradle-like rocking of the chair seemed to quiet her.

"Listen, Ma," said Jody, "I'm going for help. I'll be back before morning."

Jody set out into the heat. The **intense** rays of the sun shone down on him without mercy. Jody and his pony led the riderless horse across the burning sands. They traveled twenty-five miles into Mexico. Finally, Jody saw his grandfather's ranch house ahead.



The old man and his foreman, Juan Vargas, were sitting on the porch. When they saw the boy leading the riderless horse, they rushed out to him.

"Jody! What happened?" asked Grandfather.

Jody pointed to the riderless horse. "Father and Ben are dead."

Grandfather put his arms around the boy's shoulders. Juan Vargas followed them into the house.

"Let's get at the truth," said Grandfather. "When did it happen? Where?"

Jody told them everything. He even told of his mother's fears—of how she accused Grandfather. There were tears in the old man's eyes.

"It doesn't make sense," said Grandfather. "A strong man and a boy don't die without a cause. There must be a gun wound, or something."

"I knew you didn't kill them," Jody said.

Juan Vargas stared at the boy. "The boots, you wear them, no?"

"I'm not a man," said Jody. "When I'm a man, I'll wear them."

The foreman shook his head. "I have heard of things like this before," he said.

The old man stared into the keen black eyes of the Mexican.

"What do you think, Juan? Do you know anything about this terrible thing? I'll post a reward for the killers."

Juan Vargas got up and left the room.

A few minutes later he returned with the boots. He took a knife from his pocket. Then slowly he went over the boots with the knife, picking at the beautifully carved leather.

Jody cried out. "He's wrecking Pa's boots!"

Before Jody could stop him, Juan Vargas cut a neat patch out of the right boot. The Mexican very carefully handed the circle of leather to the old man.

"This is the murderer!" said Juan.

Buried deep in the leather was the poisonous **fang** of a rattlesnake.

**GETTING THE MEANING OF THE STORY.** Complete each of the following sentences by putting an *x* in the box next to the correct answer. Each sentence helps you get the meaning of the story.

- Jody's mother thought that grandfather  
 a. would be glad to see Jody.  
 b. would help the family find water.  
 c. had killed Pa and Ben.
- In order to get to grandfather's house Jody had to  
 a. go by stagecoach.  
 b. travel twenty-five miles by pony.  
 c. take a train.
- Jody refused to wear his father's boots because  
 a. they were much too small for him.  
 b. he didn't like the way they looked.  
 c. he was not yet a man.
- Juan Vargas slowly went over the boots with  
 a. his knife.  
 b. his hands.  
 c. a piece of cloth.

× 5 =   
NUMBER CORRECT      YOUR SCORE

**REVIEWING STORY ELEMENTS.** Each of the following questions reviews your understanding of story elements. Put an *x* in the box next to the correct answer to each question.

- Who is the *main character* in "His Father's Boots"?  
 a. Ben  
 b. Ma  
 c. Jody
- What caused the *conflict* between Pa and Grandfather?  
 a. They had a quarrel over how to bring up Ben and Jody.  
 b. They had a fight over money.  
 c. They were on different sides in the Civil War.
- What happened last in the *plot* of the story?  
 a. Juan Vargas handed a patch of leather to the old man.  
 b. Ben rode out to grandfather's ranch.  
 c. Jody searched the hills for his father.
- Where is this story *set*?  
 a. in a small Southern town  
 b. in Texas and Mexico  
 c. in a city in the East

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**EXAMINING VOCABULARY WORDS.** Answer the following vocabulary questions by putting an *x* in the box next to the correct answer. The vocabulary words are printed in **boldface** in the story. If you wish, look back at the words before you answer the questions.

- The intense rays of the sun beat down on Jody without mercy. What is the meaning of the word *intense*?
  - a. very strong
  - b. very weak
  - c. very friendly
- Jody felt that his father's death was a tragedy. As used in this sentence, the word *tragedy* means a
  - a. happy event.
  - b. terrible event.
  - c. common event.
- The drought had wiped out their cattle. And now the well had gone dry. What is the meaning of the word *drought*?
  - a. a group of sharp rocks and stones
  - b. a long period of time without rain
  - c. a week or more of wet weather
- Buried in the leather was the poisonous fang of a rattlesnake. A *fang* is a
  - a. thick tail.
  - b. strong smell.
  - c. long, pointed tooth.

× 5 =   
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**ADDING WORDS TO A PASSAGE.** Complete the following paragraph by filling in each blank with one of the words listed in the box below. Each of the words appears in the story. Since there are five words and four blanks, one word in the group will not be used.

Sometimes, rattlesnakes give a warning sound \_\_\_\_\_ they strike. When a rattlesnake is frightened or surprised, it lifts its tail \_\_\_\_\_ the ground. It shakes the tail \_\_\_\_\_ and forth very quickly. The rattles at the tip of the tail strike against each other. That is what makes the warning \_\_\_\_\_.

off    before  
  
sun  
  
sound    back

× 5 =   
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**THINKING ABOUT THE STORY.** Each of the following questions will help you to think critically about the selection. Put an *x* in the box next to the correct answer.

- We may infer (figure out) that Pa and Ben were killed by
  - a. gunshot wounds.
  - b. poison from a snake.
  - c. the heat on the burning sands.
- If he had worn his father's boots, Jody would probably have
  - a. tripped and fallen.
  - b. gotten into a fight with his grandfather.
  - c. been killed, too.
- Clues in "His Father's Boots" suggest that the story took place
  - a. just a few years ago.
  - b. about 20 years ago.
  - c. more than 100 years ago.
- Which statement below is true?
  - a. Pa and Ben never reached grandfather's ranch.
  - b. Juan Vargas couldn't figure out who the murderer was.
  - c. Grandfather was planning to shoot Jody.

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**Thinking More about the Story.** Your teacher might want you to write your answers.

- Jody said that he was not ready to wear the boots yet. Do you think that he earned the right to wear the boots now? Explain your answer.
- Grandfather respected Juan Vargas—with good reason. Show that this statement is true.
- Suppose that the story continued. Do you think Grandfather would have returned home with Jody? Give reasons to support your answer.

Use the boxes below to total your scores for the exercises.

**G**ETTING THE MEANING OF THE STORY  
 +  
 **R**EVIEWING STORY ELEMENTS  
 +  
 **E**XAMINING VOCABULARY WORDS  
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 **A**DDING WORDS TO A PASSAGE  
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 **T**HINKING ABOUT THE STORY  
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 **Score Total: Story 7**