



Chapter One – by Kay Hively

John Robert gave the heavy rope a final tug. It seemed secure, so the 10-year-old boy stood up and stepped back away from the big stump. Now that he was far enough away to be safe, John Robert signaled to his father.

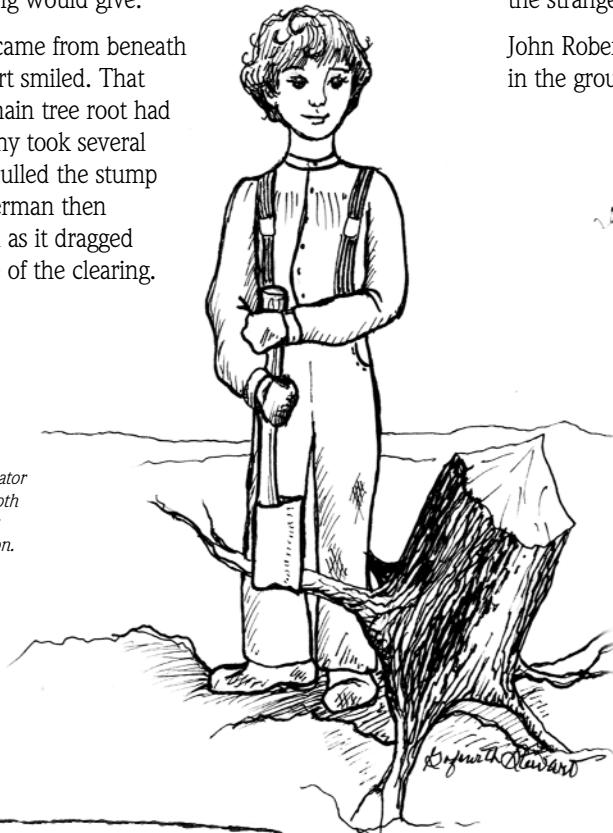
Mr. Herman spoke gently to the two mules. Atlas and Jenny stepped forward and the rope tightened. Once more, Mr. Herman spoke encouragingly, and the mules leaned forward another step. John Robert watched as the stump moved only a tiny bit.

All summer long, John Robert had helped his father clear this new piece of ground. This was the last stump. Cutting down the trees was easy. But removing stumps was hard work. John Robert and his father used axes to cut the roots apart. Then the mules were used to add great power to the job.

Working the stumps all summer had built up the muscles in John Robert's arms, legs and back. Each day he was becoming stronger and stronger. Now he just watched, his eyes moving from the stump to Atlas and Jenny, and then back to the stump. He knew any moment something would give.

Suddenly a loud pop came from beneath the stump. John Robert smiled. That loud pop meant the main tree root had broken. Atlas and Jenny took several more easy steps and pulled the stump out of its hole. Mr. Herman then guided the mule team as it dragged the stump to the edge of the clearing.

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John Robert took his ax and began cutting the small roots that were left. Soon Mr. Herman came back to help his son. They removed all the old roots and filled the hole with dirt. Then, with their field work done, they led the mules back to their little barn. The barn was near the cabin where the family had settled just two years ago. That was 1808, when John Robert was only 8 years old.

Mr. Herman led the mules to a small pen by the barn while John Robert went to the water trough to wash up for supper.

It had been a hot summer, and even though it was already October, the heat refused to go away. John Robert bent over the trough, filled his cupped hands with water and threw it into his hot, dirty face. The cool water felt so good that John Robert closed his eyes and lowered his entire head into the water, soaking his face, hair and the back of his neck.

As he raised up out of the trough, John Robert shook his head to sling off the excess water. Then, wiping the water from his face, he opened his eyes. And there, looking straight into his face, was the strangest looking creature John Robert had ever seen.

John Robert wanted to run, but his boots seemed to be buried in the ground, like one of the big stumps.

Things to Think About and Do

- John Robert and his father were clearing land. Why did people on the frontier clear land? Atlas and Jenny were mules. What do you call a male mule? What do you call a female mule?
- This story takes place in 1810. John Robert is 10 years old. In what year was John Robert born? If his birthday is April 22, find out on which day of the week he was born. Use a perpetual calendar to find the answer.
- Today companies offer tree and stump removal for a fee. Look through the Classified section of your newspaper and locate businesses that offer these services. Do you think they still use mules? Research the tools used for this today.

STANDARDS: G1:2; G1:4; SS5; SS7; M1; S3

Next Week: Chapter Two – A big stranger