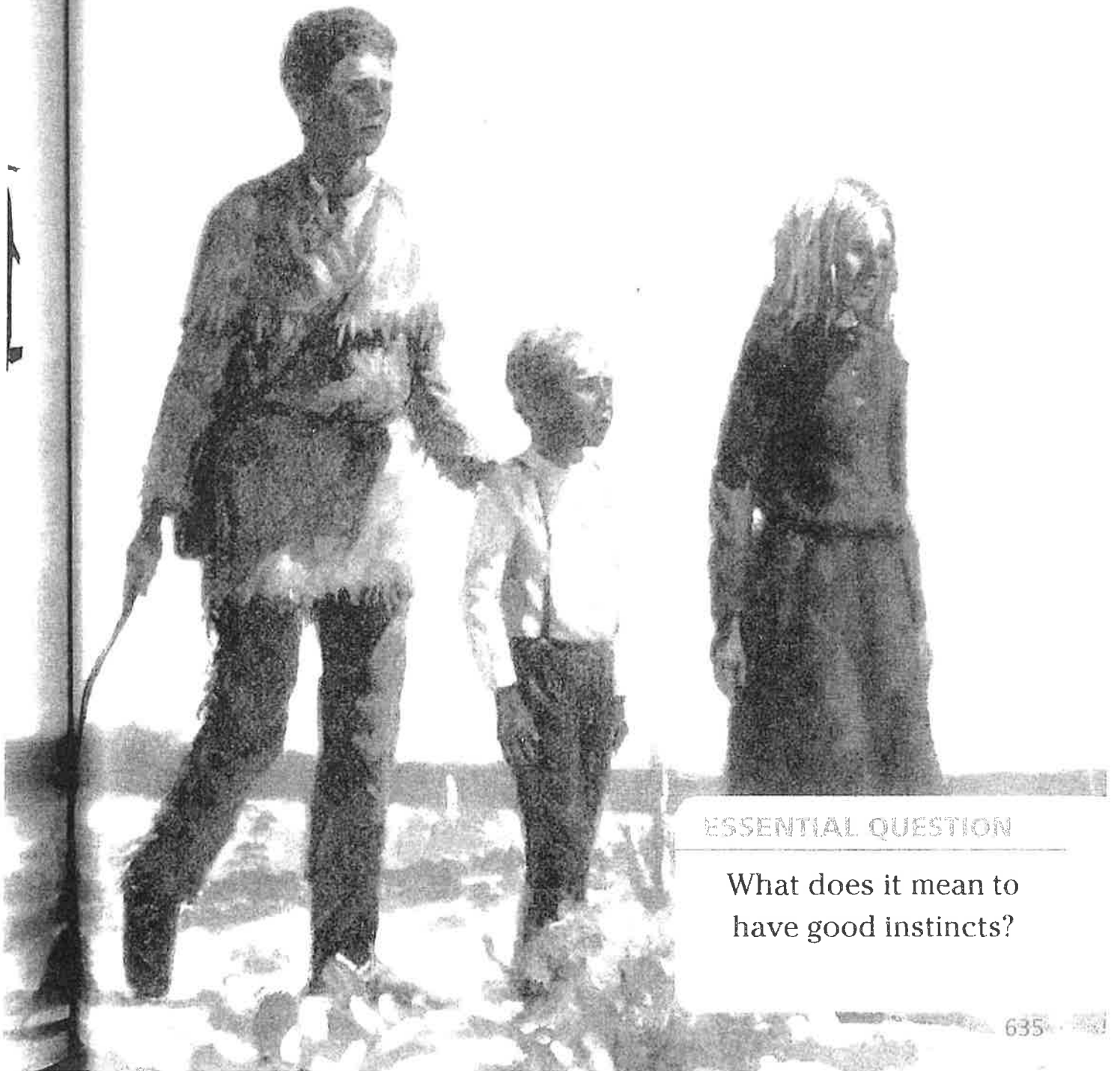


TUCKET'S TRAVELS



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What does it mean to have good instincts?

If there was one thing Francis Tucket knew with certainty it was that death was close to taking them.

Dawn was coming and here he was, a fifteen-year-old boy in charge of two children, walking across a sunbeaten, airless plain that seemed to be endless. Francis, Lottie and Billy had no food or water or any immediate hope of getting any, and at any moment a dozen or two of the dirt-meanest men Francis had ever seen in a world *full* of mean men could come riding up on them and . . .

He didn't finish the thought. There was no need. Besides, in surviving Indian fights, blizzards, battles and thieves, he had learned the primary rule about danger. It would come if it would come. You could try to be ready for it, you could plan on it, you could even expect it, but it would come when it wanted to come.

Lottie and Billy understood this rule too. He had found them sitting in a wagon on the prairie all alone. Their father had died of cholera (KAHL ur uh) and their wagon train had abandoned the family, afraid of disease. Lottie had been nine then, Billy six. Francis hadn't thought he and the children would stay together long—after all, he had to keep searching for his own family. He'd been separated from them a year before, when Pawnees had kidnapped him from the wagon train on the Oregon Trail. But Francis and Lottie and Billy—well, they were used to each other. They stuck together. Unlike Francis and Jason Grimes, the one-armed mountain man.

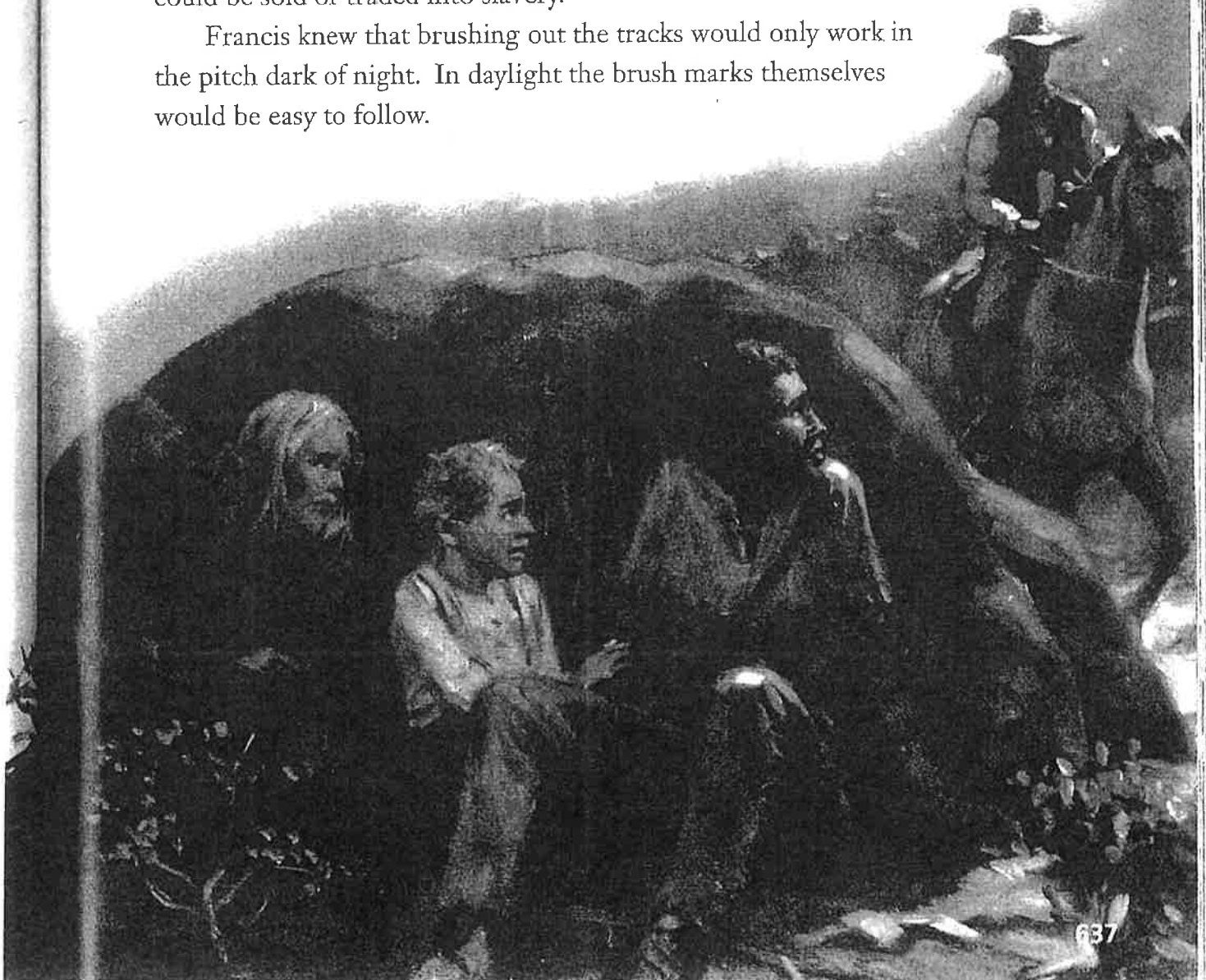
Jason Grimes had rescued Francis from the Pawnees and taught him how to survive in the West on his own. Then they'd parted ways.

Until last night. Last night when Grimes had helped them to escape from the Comancheros (koh mahn CHEH rohs). The Comancheros were an outlaw band, ruthless, terrifying, inhumanly tough. To escape, Grimes had had to take the packhorses Francis and Lottie and Billy had been riding and lead them off empty, hoping the Comancheros would follow his tracks westward while the three children headed north on foot in the dark of night.

It was a decent plan—it was their *only* plan—and it seemed to be working. As Francis and the two children had moved north in the dark, they had seen the Comancheros ride past them after Mr. Grimes, tracking the horses. The Comancheros had missed the footprints of the children, partly because it was hard to see them and partly because Francis made Lottie and Billy walk in each other's footprints. He came last, brushing out the trail with a piece of mesquite behind him.

But luck was the major factor in the plan. If the Comancheros caught Grimes or even got within sight of him they'd know that Francis and the children weren't with him. They'd turn and come back for the children. Children meant real money because they could be sold or traded into slavery.

Francis knew that brushing out the tracks would only work in the pitch dark of night. In daylight the brush marks themselves would be easy to follow.



"I'm tired." Billy stopped suddenly. "I think we've gone far enough."

Francis frowned. When Francis had first met Billy, the boy wouldn't say a word. And now he'd gone from never talking at all to complaining.

"If they catch us they'll skin you," warned Lottie. "Now keep walking. If we don't keep moving they'll be on us like dogs, won't they, Francis? On us just like dogs . . ."



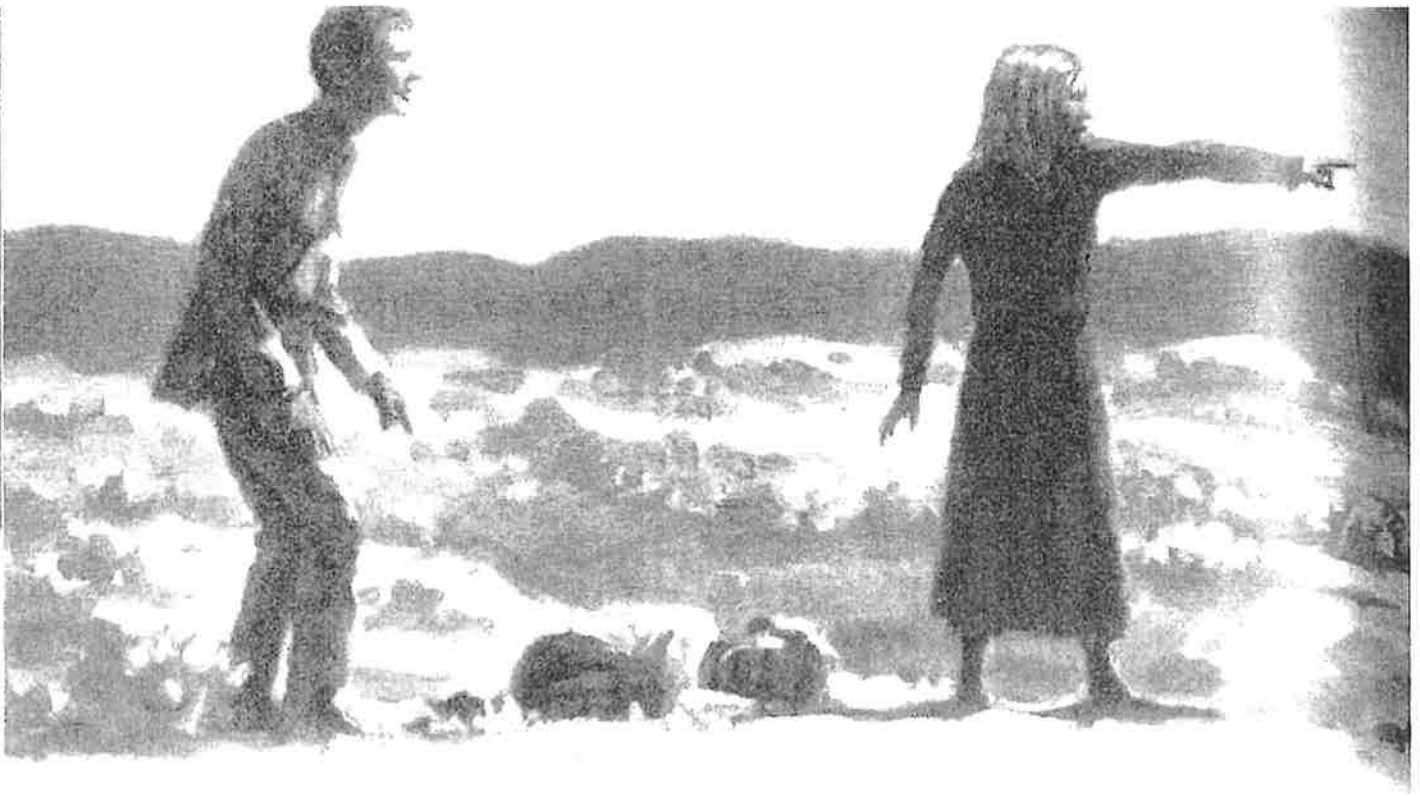
Lottie loved to talk, would talk all the time if she had the chance, seemed to have been talking since Francis had found her in that wagon. Lottie would explain every little detail of every little part of every little thing she was talking about so that not a single aspect of it was missed, and she sometimes drove Francis over the edge. Now, as Billy started moving again, Francis picked up the pace, pushed them as hard as they could stand it and then harder, and Lottie didn't have breath left to speak.

Dawn brought the sun and the sun brought heat. Francis and the children were bareheaded and the sun quickly went to work on them. Billy wanted to complain, especially as the morning progressed and there was no water and the sun rose higher and became hotter, but Francis drove them until Billy began to weave. Then Francis picked Billy up and carried him piggyback, mile after mile, then yard after yard, and finally, step after step.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Sequence of Events What steps do Francis and the children take to escape the Comancheros during the night? What is happening now that it is day?





Lottie saw it first.

“There,” she said. “See the spot?”

Francis was near dead with exhaustion. He had hardly slept at all for the two nights before and had been used roughly by the Comancheros in the bargain. He was close to the breaking point as he said, “What spot?”

“There. No, more to the right. On the horizon. It’s trees. I’m sure of it. A stand of trees.”

They had seen many mirages—images of trees and water that were not there. But Francis looked where she was pointing and saw it instantly. He stopped and set Billy down. The boy was asleep, and he collapsed in a heap, still sleeping. “You’re right! Trees. And trees mean water.”

He turned and studied the horizon. He hadn’t been able to look up when carrying Billy and he was shocked now to see a plume of dust off to the west and south. It was at least fifteen miles away, against some hills in the distance. It was so far away that it seemed tiny, but Francis knew it was probably caused by riders, many riders.



Lottie saw him staring.

“Could it be buffalo?” She watched the dust. “A small herd?”

Not here, Francis thought. Not here in this dust and heat with no grass and no water. Buffalo wouldn’t be that stupid. “Sure. It’s buffalo.”

“You’re lying.” She sighed. “I can tell when you’re lying to me, Francis Tucket. It’s them, isn’t it?”

Francis said nothing but his mind was racing. So the riders were heading back eastward. But why would they be coming back so soon? Had they caught Grimes already? If so they’d be looking for the children. Or had they given up the chase or just seen Grimes and found that he was alone and turned back, still looking for the children? They might miss the tracks . . .

He knew this was a vain hope. There hadn’t been a breath of wind to blow the dust over the brush marks he’d left, and undoubtedly they had men who were good trackers, men who were alive because they could track mice over rocks. So the Comancheros would find them and then . . . and then . . .

He looked to the trees, which were about two miles away. He could carry Billy there. They could get to the trees in time. Then what? The riders would keep coming back until they came to the place where Francis and the children had turned off, about nine miles back. They would see the marks and turn and start north. Nine miles. The horses would be tired but they would make ten miles an hour. They had to ride maybe twenty miles back to the turn and then nine or ten miles north after the children. He let the figures work through his tired brain. Maybe four hours but more likely three. The riders would be on them in three hours.

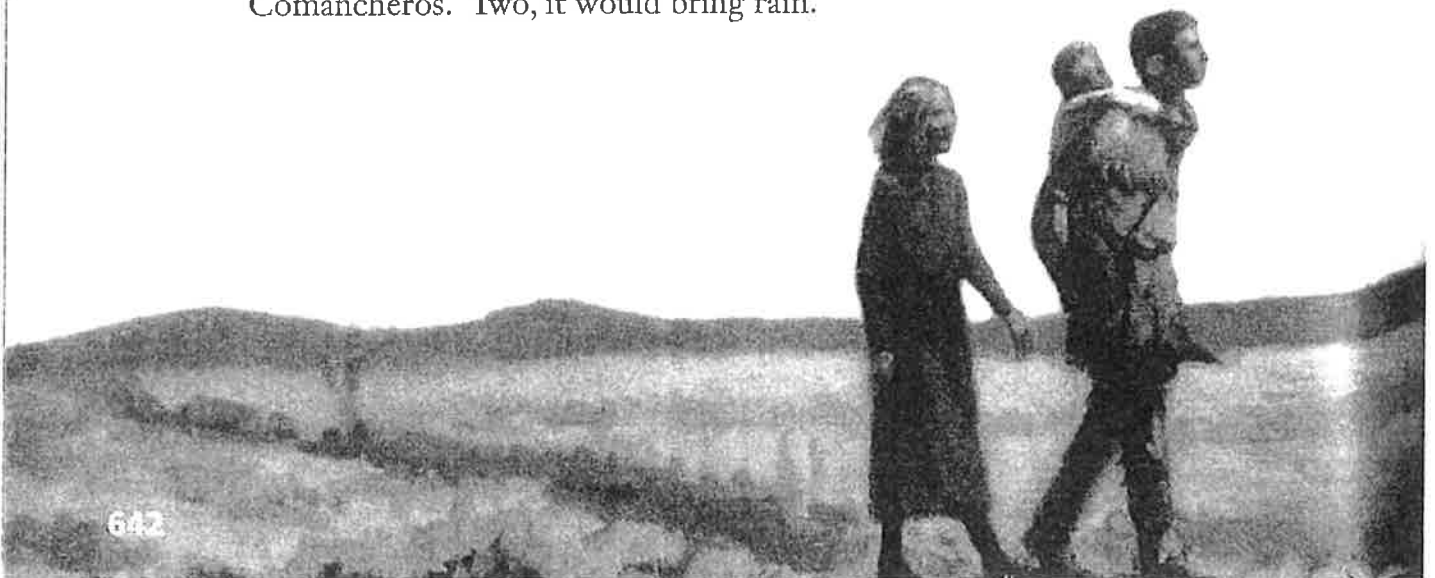
Francis and Billy and Lottie would need an hour to make the trees and then . . . and then nothing.

It would all just happen later. They'd get him and take the children and nothing would have changed except that a few horses would be very tired and he, Francis, would be dead.

And as for what would happen to Lottie and Billy—his heart grew cold. But there was something else back there, more than just the plume of dust. There was a cloud. At first it was low on the horizon and showed only as a gray line, so low that Francis almost didn't see it. But it was growing rapidly, the wind bringing it from the west, and as it grew and rose he could see that it was the top edge of a thunderhead.

It didn't *look* like salvation, not at first. He had seen plenty of prairie thunderheads but as he watched it he realized two things.

One, it was growing rapidly, roaring along on the high winds, coming toward them at a much faster rate than the horses of the Comancheros. Two, it would bring rain.



Rain that would ease their thirst and cool their burning bodies and, far more important, rain that might wipe out their tracks, erase everything they had left behind them.

Still, it was a race, and nothing was sure. The clouds had to keep coming to beat the horsemen to where the children's tracks turned north. And it had to rain.

If the clouds turned off or didn't beat the Comancheros or didn't leave rain, then distance was all the children had. They needed to get to the trees and build some kind of defense.

Francis picked up Billy, who was still sound asleep and seemed to weigh a ton. He set off at a shambling walk, abandoning the tedious brushing in their race to get to the trees. Lottie shuffled ahead, carrying Francis's bag. She was wearing a ragged shift so dirty it seemed to be made of earth. Her yellow hair was full of dust. Francis wore buckskins, but the children only had what was left of their original clothing and what they'd managed to pick up along the way.

We're a sight, Francis thought. A ragtag mob of a sight.

He looked at the trees and they didn't seem any closer.


He looked at the cloud and it was still building, though it seemed to be heading off slightly to the south.

He looked at the dust plume and it was still moving on the same line eastward, getting ready to cross their trail.

He looked back to the trees and thought, I would absolutely kill for that old mule we had. But the mule had been taken by the Comancheros.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Author's Word Choice What vivid verbs and adjectives does the author use to show the terrible circumstances these characters are in?



They reached the trees just as the edge of the clouds caught up with them.

“Ten more feet and I would have died,” Lottie whispered, and sank to the ground.

Francis dropped Billy like a stone—the boy fell without awakening—and studied their location. It was a meandering dry streambed with a row of stunted but leafy cottonwoods on each side. There were also stands of salt cedar, thick and green, and while no water was evident the streambed seemed moist. Francis knew there was water beneath the surface or the trees would have been dead.

“Lottie, scoop a hole there, at the base of that rock.”

“You want to start digging, why don’t you just go ahead? I have more important things to do than scrape at the old ground.”

“Water.” Francis was so dry he croaked. “Dig down and let it seep in.”

“Oh. Well, why didn’t you say so?” Lottie knelt by the rock and started digging in the loose sand with her hands. When she was down two feet, she yelped.

“Here it is! Just like you said, coming in from the sides. Oh, Francis, it’s so clear, come see.” She scooped some up and drank it. “Sweet as sugar. Come, try it.”

Francis knelt and cupped his hand and drank and thought he had never tasted anything so good. But he stopped before he was full.

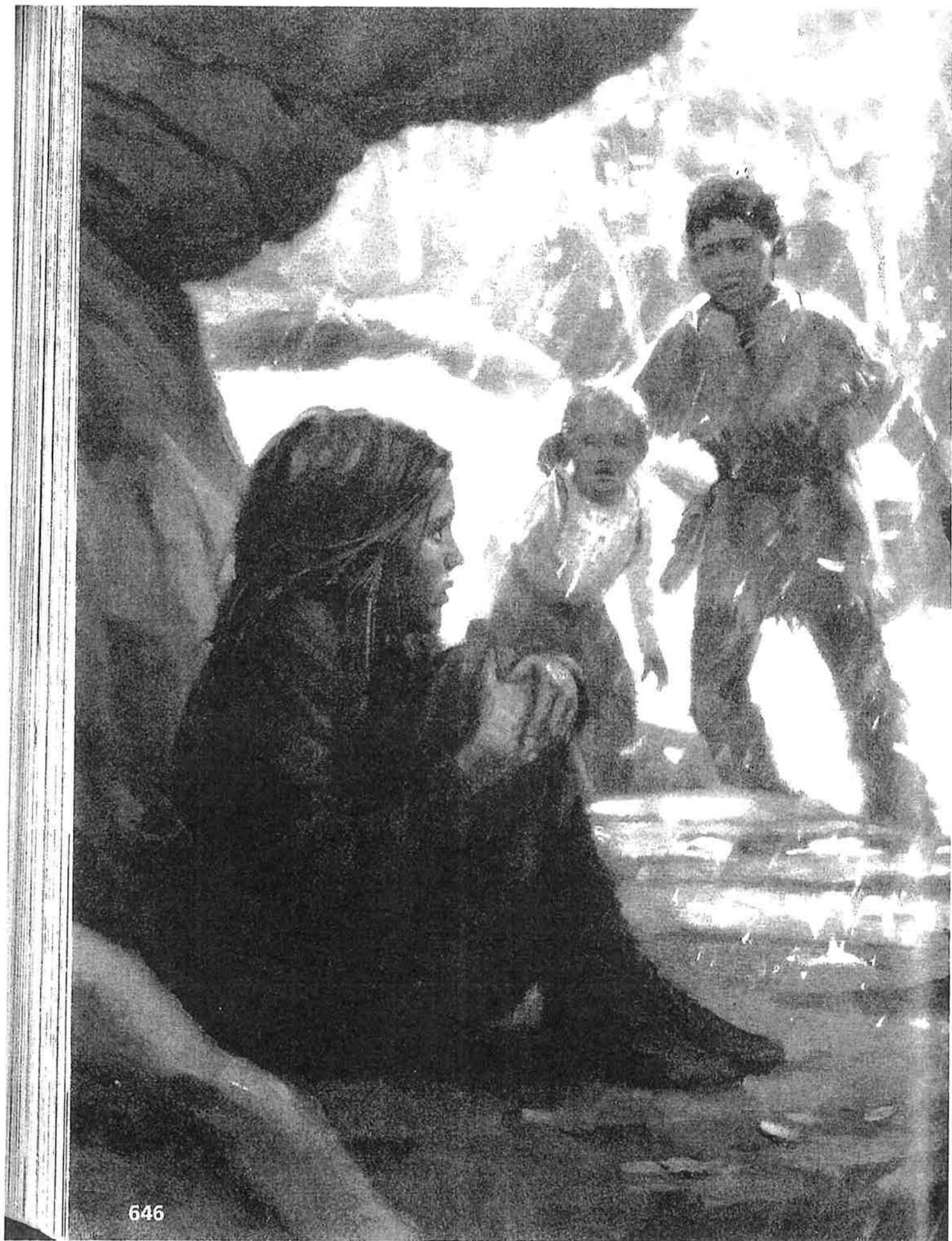
The wind was picking up now, blowing hard enough to lift dust and even sand, and he could no longer see the dust from the riders. The wind was blowing at the coming thunderheads and he smiled because even if it didn’t rain there was a good chance the wind would fill in and destroy their tracks.

By now the thunderhead was over them, dark, so huge it covered the whole sky, and the wind had increased to a scream.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Figurative Language A **metaphor** is a description that compares one thing to another thing without using *like* or *as*. What metaphor does the author use on this page to describe the sound of the wind? Explain the metaphor’s meaning.





“Over here!” Francis yelled to Lottie. “Beneath this ledge.” Incredibly, Billy was still asleep. Francis grabbed the boy and shook him until his eyes opened. “Get over by that rock ledge. Everything is going to break loose—”

A bolt of lightning hit so close Francis felt it ripple his hair, so close the thunder seemed to happen in the same split instant, and with it the sky opened and water fell on them so hard it almost drove Francis to his knees. He had never seen such rain. There seemed to be no space between the drops; it roared down, poured down in sheets, in buckets. Francis couldn't yell, couldn't think, couldn't breathe. He held Billy by the shirt and dragged him in beneath the ledge that formed the edge of the streambed, away from the trees and out of the wind.

Lottie was there already and they huddled under the overhang just as the clouds cracked again and hail the size of Francis's fist pounded down. One hailstone glanced off the side of his head and nearly knocked him out.

“Move in more,” he yelled over the roar of the storm. “Farther back—*move!*”

He pushed against Billy, who slammed into Lottie. They were already up against the clay bank beneath the ledge and could not go farther in. Francis's legs and rear were still out in the hail and took a fearful beating. He doubled his legs up but even so the pain was excruciating and though the large hailstones quickly gave way to smaller ones, his legs were immediately stiff and sore.

The streambed filled in the heavy downpour. Luckily they were near the upstream portion of the storm and so avoided the possibility of a flash flood—which would have gouged them out of the overhang and taken them downstream to drown. As it was, the water came into the pocket beneath them and turned the dirt to mud and soon they were sitting in a waist-deep hole of thick mud and water. And just as soon, in minutes, the rain had stopped, the clouds had scudded away and the sun was out, cooking the mud dry.

Aching, Francis pulled himself into the sun. The children crawled after. Water still ran in the stream but was receding quickly. The hot sun felt good, and Francis wanted to take his buckskin shirt off to hang. But he knew that if he didn't keep wearing it the shirt would dry as stiff as a board.

He straightened slowly, working the pain out of his legs. He looked to the west and smiled.

There would be no tracks after *that*.

