

VIII

THE DAY HUNTING SEASON OPENED, I WAS AS NERVOUS AS Samie, our house cat. Part of that seemingly endless day was spent getting things ready for the coming night.

I cleaned my lantern and filled it full of oil. With hog lard I greased my boots until they were as soft as a hummingbird's nest. I was grinding my ax when Papa came around.

He smiled as he said, "This is the big night, isn't it?"

"It sure is, Papa," I said, "and I've waited a long time for it."

"Yes, I know," he said. "I've been thinking—there's not too much to do around here during the hunting season. I'm pretty sure I can take care of things, so you just go ahead and hunt all you want to."

"Thanks, Papa," I said. "I guess I'll be out pretty late at night, and I'll probably have to do a lot of sleeping in the daytime."

Papa started frowning. "You know," he said, "your mother doesn't like this hunting of yours very

much. She's worried about you being out all by yourself."

"I can't see why Mama has to worry," I said. "Haven't I been roaming the woods ever since I was big enough to walk, and I'm almost fourteen now."

"I know," said Papa. "It's all right with me, but women are a little different than men. They worry more."

"Now just to be on the safe side, I think it would be a good idea for you to tell us where you'll be hunting. Then if anything happens, we'll know where to look."

I told him I would, but I didn't think anything was going to happen.

After Papa had left, I started thinking. "He doesn't even talk to me like I was a boy any more. He talks to me like I was a man." These wonderful thoughts made me feel just about as big as our old red mule.

I had a good talk with my dogs. "I've waited almost three years for this night," I said, "and it hasn't been easy. I've taught you everything I know and I want you to do your best."

Little Ann acted like she understood. She whined and saved me a wash job on my face. Old Dan may have, but he didn't act like it. He just lay there in the sunshine, all stretched out and limber as a rag.

During supper Mama asked me where I was going to hunt.

"I'm not going far," I said, "just down on the river."

I could tell Mama was worried and it didn't make me feel too good.

"Billy," she said, "I don't approve of this hunting, but it looks like I can't say no; not after all you've been through, getting your dogs, and all that training."

"Aw, he'll be all right," Papa said. "Besides, he's getting to be a good-size man now."

"Man!" Mama exclaimed. "Why, he's still just a little boy."

"You can't keep him a little boy always," Papa said. "He's got to grow up some day."

"I know," Mama said, "but I don't like it, not at all, and I can't help worrying."

"Mama, please don't worry about me," I said. "I'll be all right. Why, I've been all over these hills, you know that."

"I know," she said, "but that was in the daytime. I never worried too much when it was daylight, but at night, that's different. It'll be dark and anything could happen."

"There won't be anything happen," I said. "I promise I'll be careful."

Mama got up from the table saying, "Well, it's like I said, I can't say no and I can't help worrying. I'll pray every night you're out."

The way Mama had me feeling, I didn't know whether to go hunting or not. Papa must have sensed how I felt. "It's dark now," he said, "and I understand those coons start stirring pretty early. You had better be going, hadn't you?"

While Mama was bundling me up, Papa lit my lantern. He handed it to me, saying, "I'd like to see a big coonskin on the smokehouse wall in the morning."

The whole family followed me out on the porch. There we all got a surprise. My dogs were sitting on the steps, waiting for me.

I heard Papa laugh. "Why, they know you're going hunting," he said, "know it as well as anything."

"Well, I never," said Mama. "Do you really think they do? It does look like they do. Why, just look at them."

Little Ann started wiggling and twisting. Old Dan trotted out to the gate, stopped, turned around, and looked at me.

"Sure they know Billy's going hunting," piped the little one, "and I know why."

"How do you know so much, silly?" asked the oldest one.

"Because I told Little Ann, that's why," she said, "and she told Old Dan. That's how they know."

We all had to laugh at her.

The last thing I heard as I left the house was the voice of my mother. "Be careful, Billy," she said, "and don't stay out late."

It was a beautiful night, still and frosty. A big grinning Ozark moon had the countryside bathed in a soft yellow glow. The starlit heaven reminded me of a large blue umbrella, outspread and with the handle broken off.

Just before I reached the timber, I called my dogs to me. "Now the trail will be a little different tonight," I whispered. "It won't be a hide dragged on the ground. It'll be the real thing, so remember everything I taught you and I'm depending on you. Just put one up a tree and I'll do the rest."

I turned them loose, saying, "Go get 'em."

They streaked for the timber.

By the time I had reached the river, every nerve in my body was drawn up as tight as a fiddlestring. Big-eyed and with ears open, I walked on, stopping now and then to listen. The way I was slipping along anyone would have thought I was trying to slip up on a coon myself.

I had never seen a night so peaceful and still. All around me tall sycamores gleamed like white streamers in the moonlight. A prowling skunk came wobbling up the riverbank. He stopped when he saw me. I smiled at the fox-fire glow of his small, beady, red eyes. He turned and disappeared in the underbrush. I heard a sharp snap and a feathery rustle in some brush close by. A small rodent started squealing in agony. A night hawk had found his supper.

Across the river and from far back in the rugged mountains I heard the baying of a hound. I wondered if it was the same one I had heard from my window on those nights so long ago.

Although my eyes were seeing the wonders of the

night, my ears were ever alert, listening for the sound of my hounds telling me they had found a trail.

I was expecting one of them to bawl, but when it came it startled me. The deep tones of Old Dan's voice jarred the silence around me. I dropped my ax and almost dropped my lantern. A strange feeling came over me. I took a deep breath and threw back my head to give the call of the hunter, but something went wrong. My throat felt like it had been tied in a knot. I swallowed a couple of times and the knot disappeared.

As loud as I could, I whooped, "Who-e-e-e. Get him, Dan. Get him."

Little Ann came in. The bell-like tones of her voice made shivers run up and down my spine. I whooped to her. "Who-e-e-e. Tell it to him, little girl. Tell it to him."

This was what I had prayed for, worked and sweated for, my own little hounds bawling on the trail of a river coon. I don't know why I cried, but I did. While the tears rolled, I whooped again and again.

They straightened the trail out and headed down river. I took off after them as fast as I could run.

A mile downstream the coon pulled his first trick. I could tell by my dogs' voices that they had lost the trail. When I came to them they were out on an old drift, sniffing around.

The coon had pulled a simple trick. He had run out on the drift, leaped into the water, and crossed the river. To an experienced coon hound, the crude trick would have been nothing at all, but my dogs were just big, awkward pups, trailing their first live coon.

I stood and watched, wondering if they would remember the training I had given them. Now and then I would whoop, urging them on.

Old Dan was having a fit. He whined and he bawled. He whimpered and cried. He came to me and reared up, begging for help.

"I'm not going to help you," I scolded, "and you're not going to find him out on that drift. If you

would just remember some of the training I gave you, you could find the trail. Now go find that coon."

He ran back out on the drift and started searching.

Little Ann came to me. I could see the pleading in her warm gray eyes. "I'm ashamed of you, little girl," I said. "I thought you had more sense than this. If you let him fool you this easily, you'll never be a coon dog."

She whined, turned, and trotted downstream to search again for the lost trail.

I couldn't understand. Had all the training I had given them been useless? I knew if I waded the river they would follow me. Once on the other side, it would be easy for them to find the trail. I didn't want it that way. I wanted them to figure it out by themselves. The more I thought about it, the more disgusted I became. I sat down and buried my face in my arms.

Out on the drift, Old Dan started whining. It made me angry and I got up to scold him again.

I couldn't understand his actions. He was running along the edge of the drift, whimpering and staring downriver. I looked that way. I could see something swimming for the opposite shore. At first I thought it was a muskrat. In the middle of the stream, where the moonlight was the brightest, I got a good look. It was Little Ann.

With a loud whoop, I told her how proud I was. My little girl had remembered her training.

She came out on a gravel bar, shook the water from her body, and disappeared in the thick timber. Minutes later, she let me know she had found the trail. Before the tones of her voice had died away, Old Dan plowed into the water. He was so eager to join her I could hear him whining as he swam.

As soon as his feet touched bottom in the shallows, he started bawling and lunging. White sheets of water, knocked high in the moonlight by his churning feet, gleamed like thousands of tiny white stars.

He came out of the river onto a sand bar. In his eagerness, his feet slipped in the loose sand and down he went. He came out of his roll, running and bawling. Ahead of him was a log jam. He sailed over it and disappeared down the riverbank. Seconds later I heard his deep voice blend with the sharp cries of Little Ann.

At that moment no boy in the world could have been more proud of his dogs than I was. Never again would I doubt them.

I was hurrying along, looking for a shallow riffle so I could wade across, when the voices of my dogs stopped. I waited and listened. They opened again on my side of the stream. The coon had crossed back over.

I couldn't help smiling. I knew that never again would a ringtail fool them by swimming the river.

The next trick the old fellow pulled was dandy. He climbed a large water oak standing about ten feet from the river and simply disappeared.

I got there in time to see my dogs swimming for the opposite shore. For half an hour they worked that bank. Not finding the trail, they swam back. I stood and watched them. They practically tore the riverbank to pieces looking for the trail.

Old Dan knew the coon had climbed the water oak. He went back, reared up on it, and bawled a few times.

"There's no use in doing that, boy," I said. "I know he climbed it, but he's not there now. Maybe it's like Grandpa said, he just climbed right on out through the top and disappeared in the stars."

My dogs didn't know it, but I was pretty well convinced that that was what the coon had done.

They wouldn't give up. Once again they crossed over to the other shore. It was no use. The coon hadn't touched that bank. They came back. Old Dan went up the river and Little Ann worked downstream.

An hour and a half later they gave up and came to me begging for help. I knelt down between their

wet bodies. While I scratched and petted them, I let them know that I still loved them.

"I'm not mad," I said. "I know you did your best. If that coon can fool both of us, then we're just beat. We'll go someplace else to hunt. He's not the only coon in these bottoms."

Just as I picked up my ax and lantern, Little Ann let out a bawl and tore out down the riverbank. Old Dan, with a bewildered look on his face, stood for a moment looking after her. Then, raising his head high in the air, he made my eardrums ring with his deep voice. I could hear the underbrush popping as he ran to join her.

I couldn't figure out what had taken place. Surely Little Ann had heard or seen something. I could tell by their voices that whatever it was they were after, they were close enough to see it and were probably running by sight.

The animal left the bottoms and headed for the mountains. Whatever it was, it must have realized my dogs were crowding it too closely. At the edge of the foothills it turned and came back toward the river.

I was still trying to figure out what was going on, when I realized that on striking the river the animal had again turned and was coming straight toward me. I set my lantern down and tightened my grip on the ax.

I was standing my ground quite well when visions of bears, lions, and all kinds of other animals started flashing across my mind. I jumped behind a big sycamore and was trying hard to press my body into the tree when a big coon came tearing by. Twenty-five yards behind him came my dogs, running side by side. I saw them clearly when they passed me, bawling every time their feet touched the ground.

After seeing that there was nothing to be scared of, once again I was the fearless hunter, screaming and yelling as loud as I could, "Get him, boy, get him."

I tore out after them. The trails I knew so well

were forgotten. I took off straight through the brush. I was tearing my way through some elders when the voices of my dogs stopped.

Holding my breath, I stood still and waited. Then it came, the long-drawn-out bawl of the tree bark. My little hounds had done it. They had treed their first coon.

When I came to them and saw what they had done I was speechless. I groaned and closed my eyes. I didn't want to believe it. There were a lot of big sycamores in the bottoms but the one in which my dogs had treed was the giant of them all.

While prowling the woods, I had seen the big tree many times. I had always stopped and admired it. Like a king in his own domain, it towered far above the smaller trees.

It had taken me quite a while to find a name suitable for the big sycamore. For a while I had called it "the chicken tree." In some ways it had reminded me of a mother hen hovering over her young in a rain-storm. Its huge limbs spread out over the small birch, ash, box elder, and water oak as if it alone were their protector.

Next, I named it "the giant." That name didn't last long. Mama told us children a story about a big giant that lived in the mountains and ate little children that were lost. Right away I started looking for another name.

One day, while lying in the warm sun staring at its magnificent beauty, I found the perfect name. From that day on, it was called "the big tree." I named the bottoms around it "the big tree bottoms."

Walking around it, and using the moon as a light, I started looking for the coon. High up in the top I saw a hollow in the end of a broken limb. I figured that that was the coon's den.

I could climb almost any tree I had ever seen but I knew I could never climb the big sycamore and it would take days to chop it down.

There had been very little hope from the begin-

ning, but on seeing the hollow I gave up. "Come on," I said to my dogs. "There's nothing I can do. We'll go someplace else and find another coon."

I turned to walk away. My hounds made no move to follow. They started whining. Old Dan reared up, placed his front paws on the trunk, and started bawling.

"I know he's there," I said, "but there's nothing I can do. I can't climb it. Why it's sixty feet up to the first limb and it would take me a month to cut it down."

Again I turned and started on my way.

Little Ann came to me. She reared up and started licking my hands. Swallowing the knot in my throat, I said, "I'm sorry, little girl. I want him just as badly as you do, but there's no way I can get him."

She ran back to the tree and started digging in the soft ground close to the roots.

"Come on now," I said in a gruff voice. "You're both acting silly. You know I'd get the coon for you if I could but I can't."

With a whipped-dog look on her face and with her tail between her legs, Little Ann came over. She wouldn't even look at me. Old Dan walked slowly around behind the tree and hid himself. He peeped around the big trunk and looked at me. The message I read in his friendly eyes tore at my heart. He seemed to be saying, "You told us to put one in a tree and you would do the rest."

With tears in my eyes, I looked again at the big sycamore. A wave of anger came over me. Gritting my teeth, I said, "I don't care how big you are, I'm not going to let my dogs down. I told them if they put a coon in a tree I would do the rest and I'm going to. I'm going to cut you down. I don't care if it takes me a whole year."

I walked over and sank my ax as deep as I could in the smooth white bark. My dogs threw a fit. Little Ann started turning in circles. I could hear her

pleased whimpering cry. Old Dan bawled and started gnawing on the big tree's trunk.

At first it was easy. My ax was sharp and the chips flew. Two hours later things were different. My arms felt like two dead grapevines, and my back felt like someone had pulled a plug out of one end of it and drained all the sap out.

While taking a breather, I saw I was making more progress than I thought I would. The cut I had started was a foot deep, but I still had a long way to go.

Sitting on their rears, my dogs waited and watched. I smiled at the look on their faces. Every time I stopped chopping they would come over. While Little Ann washed the sweat from my face, Old Dan would inspect my work. He seemed to be pleased with what he saw for he always wagged his tail.

Along about daylight I got my second wind and I really did make the chips fly. This burst of energy cost me dearly. By sunup I was so stiff I could hardly move. My hands and arms were numb. My back screamed with pain. I could go no further. Sitting down, I leaned back against the big tree and fell asleep.

Little Ann woke me up by washing my face. I groaned with the torture of getting to my feet. Every muscle in my body seemed to be tied in a knot. I was thinking of going down to the river to wash my face in the cool water when I heard a loud whoop. I recognized my father's voice. I whooped to let him know where I was.

Papa was riding our red mule. After he rode up, he just sat there and looked me over. He glanced at my dogs and at the big sycamore. I saw the worry leave his face. He straightened his shoulders, pursed his lips, and blew out a little air. He reminded me of someone who had just dropped a heavy load.

In a slow, calm voice, he asked, "Are you all right, Billy?"

"Yes, Papa," I said. "Oh, I'm a little tired and sleepy, otherwise I'm fine."

He slid from the mule's back and came over. "Your mother's worried," he said. "When you didn't come in, we didn't know what had happened. You should've come home."

I didn't know what to say. I bowed my head and looked at the ground. I was trying hard to choke back the tears when I felt his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm not scolding," he said. "We just thought maybe you had an accident or something."

I looked up and saw a smile on his face.

He turned and looked again at the tree. "Say," he said, "this is the sycamore you call 'the big tree,' isn't it?"

I nodded my head.

"Is there a coon in it?" he asked.

"There sure is, Papa," I said. "He's in that hollow limb. See—that one way up there. That's why I couldn't come home. I was afraid he'd get away."

"Maybe you just think he's there," Papa said. "I believe I'd make sure before I'd cut down a tree that big."

"Oh, he's there all right," I said. "My dogs weren't ten feet behind him when he went up it."

"Why are you so determined to get this coon?" Papa asked. "Couldn't you go somewhere else and tree one? Maybe the tree would be a smaller one."

"I thought about that, Papa," I said, "but I made a bargain with my dogs. I told them that if they would put one in a tree, I'd do the rest. Well, they fulfilled their part of the bargain. Now it's up to me to do my part, and I'm going to, Papa. I'm going to cut it down. I don't care if it takes me a year."

Papa laughed and said, "Oh, I don't think it'll take that long, but it will take a while. I tell you what I'll do. You take the mule and go get some breakfast. I'll chop on it until you get back."

"No, Papa," I said. "I don't want any help. I want to cut it down all by myself. You see, if someone helps

me, I wouldn't feel like I kept my part of the agreement."

An astonished look came over my father's face. "Why, Billy," he said, "you can't stay down here without anything to eat and no sleep. Besides, it'll take at least two days to cut that tree down and that's hard work."

"Please, Papa," I begged, "don't make me quit. I just have to get that coon. If I don't, my dogs won't ever believe in me again."

Papa didn't know what to tell me. He scratched his head, looked over to my dogs and back at me. He started walking around. I waited for him to make up his mind. He finally reached a decision.

"Well, all right," he said. "If that's the way you want it, I'm for it even if it is only an agreement between you and your dogs. If a man's word isn't any good, he's no good himself."

"Now I have to get back and tell your mother that you're all right. It's a cinch that you can't do that kind of work on an empty stomach, so I'll send your oldest sister down with a lunch bucket."

With tears in my eyes, I said, "Tell Mama I'm sorry for not coming home last night."

"Don't you worry about your mother," he said, as he climbed on the mule's back. "I'll take care of her. Another thing, I have to make a trip to the store today and I'll talk this over with your grandfather. He may be able to help some way."

After Papa left, things were a little different. The tree didn't look as big, and my ax wasn't as heavy. I even managed to sing a little as I chopped away.

When my sister came with the lunch bucket, I could have kissed her, but I didn't. She took one look at the big tree and her blue eyes got as big as a guinea's egg.

"You're crazy," she gasped, "absolutely crazy. Why, it'll take a month to cut that tree down, and all for an old coon."

I was so busy with the fresh side pork, fried eggs,

and hot biscuits, I didn't pay much attention to her. After all, she was a girl, and girls don't think like boys do.

She raved on. "You can't possibly cut it down today, and what are you going to do when it gets dark?"

"I'm going to keep right on chopping," I said. "I stayed with it last night, didn't I? Well, I'll stay till it's cut down. I don't care how long it takes."

My sister got upset. She looked at me, threw back her small head, and looked up to the top of the big sycamore. "You're as crazy as a bedbug," she said. "Why, I never heard of such a thing."

She stepped over in front of me and very seriously asked if she could look in my eyes.

"Look in my eyes?" I said. "What do you want to do that for? I'm not sick."

"Yes, you are, Billy," she said, "very sick. Mama said when Old Man Johnson went crazy, his eyes turned green. I want to see if yours have."

This was too much. "If you don't get out of here," I shouted, "you're going to be red instead of green, and I mean that."

I grabbed up a stick and started toward her. Of course, I wouldn't have hit her for anything.

This scared her and she started for the house. I heard her saying something about an old coon as she disappeared in the underbrush.

Down in the bottom of my lunch bucket I found a neat little package of scraps for my dogs. While they were eating I walked down to a spring and filled the bucket with cool water.

The food did wonders for me. My strength came back. I spit on my hands and, whistling a coon hunter's tune, I started making the chips fly.

The cut grew so big I could have laid down in it. I moved over to another side and started a new one. Once while I was taking a rest, Old Dan came over to inspect my work. He hopped up in the cut and sniffed around.

"You had better get out of there," I said. "If that

tree takes a notion to fall, it'll mash you flatter than a tadpole's tail."

With a "no care" look on his friendly face, he gave me a hurry-up signal with a wag of his tail.

Little Ann had dug a bed in a pile of dead leaves. She looked as if she were asleep but I knew she wasn't. Every time I stopped swinging the ax, she would raise her head and look at me.

IX

BY LATE EVENING THE HAPPY TUNE I HAD BEEN WHISTLING was forgotten. My back throbbed like a stone bruise. The muscles in my legs and arms started quivering and jerking. I couldn't gulp enough air to cool the burning heat in my lungs. My strength was gone. I could go no further.

I sat down and called my dogs to me. With tears in my eyes, I told them that I just couldn't cut the big tree down.

I was trying hard to make them understand when I heard someone coming. It was Grandpa in his buggy.

I'm sure no one in the world can understand a young boy like his grandfather can. He drove up with a twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his whiskery old face.

"Hello! How are you gettin' along?" he boomed.

"Not so good, Grandpa," I said. "I don't think I can cut it down. It's just too big. I guess I'll have to give up."

"Give up!" Grandpa barked. "Now I don't want to hear you say that. No, sir, that's the last thing I

want to hear. Don't ever start anything you can't finish."

"I don't want to give up, Grandpa," I said, "but it's just too big and my strength's gone. I'm give out."

"Course you are," he said. "You've been going at it wrong. To do work like that a fellow needs plenty of rest and food in his stomach."

"How am I going to get that, Grandpa?" I asked. "I can't leave the tree. If I do, the coon will get away."

"No, he won't," Grandpa said. "That's what I came down here for. I'll show you how to keep that coon in the tree."

He walked around the big sycamore, looking up. He whistled and said, "Boy, this is a big one all right."

"Yes, it is, Grandpa," I said. "It's the biggest one in the river bottoms."

Grandpa started chuckling. "That's all right," he said. "The bigger they are the harder they fall."

"How are you going to make the coon stay in the tree, Grandpa?" I asked.

With a proud look on his face, he said, "That's another one of my coon-hunting tricks; learned it when I was a boy. We'll keep him there all right. Oh, I don't mean we can keep him there for always, but he'll stay for four or five days. That is, until he gets so hungry he just has to come down."

"I don't need that much time," I said. "I'm pretty sure I can have it down by tomorrow night."

Grandpa looked at the cut. "I don't know," he said. "Even though it is halfway down, you must remember you've been cutting on it half of one night and one day. You might make it, but it's going to take a lot of chopping."

"If I get a good night's sleep," I said, "and a couple of meals under my belt, I can do a lot of chopping."

Grandpa laughed. "Speaking of meals," he said, "your ma is having chicken and dumplings for supper. Now we don't want to miss that, so let's get busy."

"What do you want me to do, Grandpa?" I asked.

"Well, let's see," he said. "First thing we'll need is some sticks about five feet long. Take your ax, go over in that canebrake, and get us six of them."

I hurried to do what Grandpa wanted, all the time wondering what in the world he was going to do. How could he keep the coon in the tree?

When I came back, he was taking some old clothes from the buggy. "Take this stocking cap," he said. "Fill it about half-full of grass and leaves."

While I was doing this, Grandpa walked over and started looking up in the tree. "You're pretty sure he's in that hollow limb, are you?" he asked.

"He's there all right, Grandpa," I said. "There's no other place he could be. I've looked all over it and there's no other hollow anywhere."

"Well, in that case," Grandpa said, "we'd better put our man along about here."

"What man, Grandpa?" I asked in surprise.

"The one we're going to make," he said. "To us it'll be a scarecrow, but to that coon it'll be a man."

Knowing too well how smart coons were, right away I began to lose confidence. "I don't see how anything like that can keep a coon in a tree," I said.

"It'll keep him there all right," Grandpa said. "Like I told you before, they're curious little devils. He'll poke his head out of that hole, see this man standing here, and he won't dare come down. It'll take him four or five days to figure out that it isn't a real honest-to-goodness man. By that time it'll be too late. You'll have his hide tacked on the smokehouse wall."

The more I thought about it, the more I believed it, and then there was that serious look on Grandpa's face. That was all it took. I was firmly convinced.

I started laughing. The more I thought about it, the funnier it got. Great big laughing tears rolled down my cheek.

"What's so funny?" Grandpa asked. "Don't you believe it'll work?"

"Sure it'll work, Grandpa," I said. "I know it will."

I was just thinking—those coons aren't half as smart as they think they are, are they?"

We both had a good laugh at this.

With the sticks and some bailing wire, Grandpa made a frame that looked almost like a gingerbread man. On this he put an old pair of pants and a red sweater. We stuffed the loose flabby clothes with grass and leaves. He wired the stocking-cap head in place and stepped back to inspect his work.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked.

"If it had a face," I said, "you couldn't tell it from a real man."

"We can fix that," Grandpa chuckled.

He took a stick and dug some black grease from one of the hub caps on the buggy. I stood and watched while he applied his artistic touch. In the stocking-cap head he made two mean-looking eyes, a crooked nose, and the ugliest mouth I had ever seen.

"Well, what do you think of that?" he asked.

"Looks pretty good, huh?"

Laughing fit to kill, and talking all at the same time, I told him that I wouldn't blame the coon if he stayed in the tree until Gabriel blew his horn.

"He won't stay that long," Grandpa chuckled, "but he'll stay long enough for you to cut that tree down."

"That's all I want," I said.

"We'd better be going," Grandpa said. "It's getting late and we don't want to miss that supper."

I was so stiff and sore he had to help me to the buggy seat.

I called to my dogs. Little Ann came, but not willingly. Old Dan refused to leave the tree.

"Come on, boy," I coaxed. "Let's go home and get something to eat. We'll come back tomorrow."

He bowed his head and looked the other way.

"Come on," I scolded, "we can't sit here all night."

This hurt his feelings. He walked around behind the big sycamore and hid.

"Well, I'll be darned," Grandpa said as he jumped down from the buggy. "He knows that coon's there and he doesn't want to leave it. You've got a coon hound there and I mean a good one."

He picked Old Dan up in his arms and set him in the buggy.

All the way home I had to hold on to his collar to keep him from jumping out and going back to the tree.

As our buggy wound its way up through the bottoms, Grandpa started talking. "You know, Billy," he said, "about this tree-chopping of yours, I think it's all right. In fact, I think it would be a good thing if all young boys had to cut down a big tree like that once in their life. It does something for them. It gives them determination and will power. That's a good thing for a man to have. It goes a long way in his life. The American people have a lot of it. They have proved that, all down through history, but they could do with a lot more of it."

I couldn't see this determination and will power that Grandpa was talking about very clearly. All I could see was a big sycamore tree, a lot of chopping, and the hide of a ringtail coon that I was determined to have.

As we reached the house, Mama came out. Right away she started checking me over. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Sure, Mama," I said. "What makes you think something's wrong with me?"

"Well, I didn't know," she said. "The way you acted when you got down from the buggy, I thought maybe you were hurt."

"Aw, he's just a little sore and stiff from all that chopping," Grandpa said, "but he'll be all right. That'll soon go away."

After Mama saw that there were no broken bones, or legs chopped off, she smiled and said, "I never know any more. I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

Papa hollered from the porch, "Come on in. We've been waiting supper on you."

"We're having chicken and dumplings," Mama beamed, "and I cooked them especially for you."

During the meal I told Grandpa I didn't think that the coon in the big tree was the same one my dogs had been trailing at first.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

I told how the coon had fooled us and how Little Ann had seen or heard this other coon. I figured he had just walked up on my dogs before he realized it.

A smile spread all over Grandpa's face. Chuckling, he said, "It does look that way, but it wasn't. No, Billy, it was the same coon. They're much too smart to ever walk up on a hound like that. He pulled a trick and it was a good one. In fact, it'll fool nine out of ten dogs."

"Well, what did he do, Grandpa?" I asked. "I'm pretty sure he didn't cross the river, so how did he work it?"

Grandpa pushed the dishes back and, using his fork as a pencil, he drew an imaginary line on the tablecloth. "It's called the backtracking trick," he said. "Here's how he worked it. He climbed that water oak but he only went up about fifteen or twenty feet. He then turned around and came down in his same tracks. He backtracked on his original trail for a way. When he heard your dogs coming he leaped far up on the side of the nearest tree and climbed up. He was in that tree all the time your dogs were searching for the lost trail. After everything had quieted down, he figured that they had given up. That's when he came down and that's when Little Ann either heard or saw him."

Pointing the fork at me, Grandpa said very seriously, "You mark my word, Billy, in no time at all that Little Ann will know every trick a coon can pull."

"You know, Grandpa," I said, "she wouldn't bark treed at the water oak like Old Dan did."

"Course she wouldn't," he said. "She knew he wasn't there."

"Why, I never heard of such a thing," Mama said. "I'd no idea coons were that smart. Why, for all anyone knows he may not be in the big tree at all. Maybe he pulled another trick. It'd be a shame if Billy cut it down and found there was no coon in it."

"Oh, he's there, Mama," I hastily replied. "I know he is. They were right on his tail when he went up. Besides, Little Ann was bawling her head off when I came to them."

"Of course he's there," Grandpa said. "They were crowding him too closely. He didn't have time to pull another trick."

Grandpa left soon after supper, saying to me, "I'll be back down in a few days and I want to see that coon hide."

I thanked him for helping me and walked out to the buggy with him.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "I heard there was a fad back in the New England states. Seems like everyone is going crazy over coonskin coats. Now if this is true, I look for the price of coon hides to take a jump."

I was happy to hear this and told my father what Grandpa had said. Papa laughed and said, "Well, if you can keep the coons out of those big sycamores, you might make a little money."

Before I went to bed, Mama made me take a hot bath. Then she rubbed me all over with some liniment that burned like fire and smelled like a civet cat.

It seemed like I had barely closed my eyes when Mama woke me up. "Breakfast is about ready, Billy," she said.

I was so stiff and sore I had trouble putting my clothes on. Mama helped me.

"Maybe you'd better let that coon go," she said. "I don't think he's worth all of this."

"I can't do that, Mama," I said. "I've gone too far now."

Papa came in from the barn. "What's the matter?" he asked. "You a little stiff?"

"A little stiff!" Mama exclaimed. "Why he could hardly put his clothes on."

"Aw, he'll be all right," Papa said. "If I know anything about swinging an ax, it won't be long before he's as limber as a rag."

Mama just shook her head and started putting our breakfast on the table.

While we were eating, Papa said, "You know I woke up several times last night and each time I was sure I heard a hound bawling. It sounded like Old Dan."

I quit the table on the run and headed for my doghouse. I didn't have to go all the way. Little Ann met me on the porch. I asked her where Old Dan was and called his name. He was nowhere around.

Little Ann started acting strangely. She whined and stared toward the river bottoms. She ran out to the gate, came back, and reared up on me.

Mama and Papa came out on the porch.

"He's not here," I said. "I think he has gone back to the tree."

"I don't think he'd do that, would he?" Mama said. "Maybe he's around someplace. Have you looked in the doghouse?"

I ran and looked. He wasn't there.

"Everybody be quiet and listen," I said.

I walked out beyond the gate a little ways and whooped as loud as I could. My voice rang like a bell in the still, frosty morning. Before the echo had died away the deep "Ou-u-u-u" of Old Dan rolled out of the river bottoms.

"He's there," I said. "He wanted to make sure the coon stayed in the tree. You see, Mama, why I have to get that coon. I can't let him down."

"Well, I never in all my life," she said. "I had no idea a dog loved to hunt that much. Yes, Billy, I can see now, and I want you to get him. I don't care if you

have to cut down every tree in those bottoms. I want you to get that coon for those dogs."

"I'm going to get him, Mama," I said, "and I'm going to get him today if I possibly can."

Papa laughed and said, "Looks like there wasn't any use in building that scarecrow. All you had to do was tell Old Dan to stay and watch the tree."

I left the house in a run. Now and then I would stop and whoop. Each time I was answered by the deep voice of Old Dan.

Little Ann ran ahead of me. By the time I reached the big tree, their voices were making the bottoms ring.

When I came tearing out of the underbrush, Old Dan threw a fit. He tried to climb the sycamore. He would back way off, then, bawling and running as fast as he could, he would claw his way far up on its side.

Little Ann, not to be outdone, reared up and placed her small front paws on the smooth white bark. She told the ringtail coon that she knew he was there.

After they had quieted down, I called Old Dan to me. "I'm proud of you, boy," I said. "It takes a good dog to stay with a tree all night, but there wasn't any need in you coming back. The coon wouldn't have gotten away. That's why we built the scarecrow."

Little Ann came over and started rolling in the leaves. The way I was feeling toward her, I couldn't even smile at her playful mood. "Of course you feel good," I said in an irritated voice, "and it's no wonder, you had a good night's sleep in a nice warm doghouse, but Old Dan didn't. He was down here in the cold all by himself, watching the tree. The way you're acting, I don't believe you care if the coon gets away or not."

I would have said more but just then I noticed something. I walked over for a better look. There, scratched deep in the soft leaves were two little beds. One was smaller than the other. Looking at Little Ann, I read the answer in her warm gray eyes.

Old Dan hadn't been alone when he had gone back to the tree. She too had gone along. There was

no doubt that in the early morning she had come home to get me.

There was a lump in my throat as I said, "I'm sorry, little girl, I should've known."

The first half-hour was torture. At each swing of the ax my arms felt like they were being torn from their sockets. I gritted my teeth and kept hacking away. My body felt like it did the time my sister rolled me down the hill in a barrel.

As Papa had said, in a little while the warm heat from the hard work limbered me up. I remembered what my father did when he was swinging an ax. At the completion of each swing, he always said, "Ha!" I tried it. Ker-wham. "Ha!" Ker-wham. "Ha!" I don't know if it helped or not, but I was willing to try anything if it would hurry the job.

Several times before noon I had to stop and rake my chips out of the way. I noticed that they weren't the big, even, solid chips like my father made when he was chopping. They were small and seemed to crumble up and come all to pieces. Neither were the cuts neat and even. They were ragged and looked more like the work of beavers. But I wasn't interested in any beautiful tree-chopping. All I wanted was to hear the big sycamore start popping.

Along in the middle of the afternoon I felt a stinging in one of my hands. When I saw it was a blister I almost cried. At first there was only one. Then two. One after another they rose up on my hands like small white marbles. They filled up and turned a pale pinkish color. When one would burst, it was all I could do to keep from screaming. I tore my handkerchief in half and wrapped my hands. This helped for a while, but when the cloth began to stick to the raw flesh I knew it was the end.

Crying my heart out, I called my dogs to me and showed them my hands. "I can't do it," I said. "I've tried, but I just can't cut it down. I can't hold the ax any longer."

Little Ann whined and started licking my sore

hands. Old Dan seemed to understand. He showed his sympathy by nuzzling me with his head.

Brokenhearted, I started for home. As I turned, from the corner of my eye I saw Grandpa's scarecrow. It seemed to be laughing at me. I looked over to the big sycamore. It lacked so little being cut down. A small wedge of solid wood was all that was holding it up. I let my eyes follow the smooth white trunk up to the huge spreading limbs.

Sobbing, I said, "You think you have won, but you haven't. Although I can't get the coon, neither can you live, because I have cut off your breath of life." And then I thought. "Why kill the big tree and not accomplish anything?" I began to feel bad.

Kneeling down between my dogs, I cried and prayed. "Please God, give me the strength to finish the job. I don't want to leave the big tree like that. Please help me finish the job."

I was trying to rewrap my hands so I could go back to work when I heard a low droning sound. I stood up and looked around. I could still hear the noise but couldn't locate it. I looked up. High in the top of the big sycamore a breeze had started the limbs to swaying. A shudder ran through the huge trunk.

I looked over to my right at a big black gum tree. Not one limb was moving. On its branches a few dead leaves hung silent and still. One dropped and floated lazily toward the ground.

Over on my left stood a large hackberry. I looked up to its top. It was as still as a fence post.

Another gust of wind caught in the top of the big tree. It started popping and snapping. I knew it was going to fall. Grabbing my dogs by their collars, I backed off to safety.

I held my breath. The top of the big sycamore rocked and swayed. There was a loud crack that seemed to come from deep inside the heavy trunk. Fascinated, I stood and watched the giant of the bottoms. It seemed to be fighting so hard to keep standing. Several times I thought it would fall, but in a

miraculous way it would pull itself back into perfect balance.

The wind itself seemed to be angry at the big tree's stubborn resistance. It growled and moaned as it pushed harder against the wavering top. With one final grinding, creaking sigh, the big sycamore started down. It picked up momentum as the heavy weight of the overbalanced top dove for the ground. A small ash was smothered by its huge bulk. There was a lighting-like crack as its trunk snapped.

In its downward plunge, the huge limbs stripped the branches from the smaller trees. A log-sized one knifed through the top of a water oak. Splintered limbs flew skyward and rained out over the bottoms. With a cyclone roar, the big tree crashed to the ground, and then silence settled over the bottoms.

Out of the broken, twisted, tangled mass streaked a brown furry ball. I turned my dogs loose and started screaming at the top of my voice, "Get him, Dan, get him."

In his eagerness, Old Dan ran head on into a bur oak tree. He sat down and with his deep voice told the river bottoms that he had been hurt.

It was Little Ann who caught the coon. I heard the ringtail squall when she grabbed him. Scared half to death, I snatched up a club and ran to help her.

The coon was all over her. He climbed up on her head, growling, slashing, ripping, and tearing. Yelping with pain, she shook him off and he streaked for the river. I thought surely he was going to get away. At the very edge of the river's bank, she caught him again.

I was trying hard to get in a lick with my club but couldn't for fear of hitting Little Ann. Through the tears in my eyes I saw the red blurry form of Old Dan sail into the fight. He was a mad hound. His anger at the bur oak tree was taken out on the coon.

They stretched Old Ringy out between them and pinned him to the ground. It was savage and brutal. I

could hear the dying squalls of the coon and the deep growls of Old Dan. In a short time it was all over.

With sorrow in my heart, I stood and watched while my dogs worried the lifeless body. Little Ann was satisfied first. I had to scold Old Dan to make him stop.

Carrying the coon by a hind leg, I walked back to the big tree for my ax. Before leaving for home, I stood and looked at the fallen sycamore. I should have felt proud over the job I had done, but for some reason I couldn't. I knew I would miss the giant of the bottoms, for it had played a wonderful part in my life. I thought of the hours I had whiled away staring at its beauty and how hard it had been finding the right name for it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to cut you down, but I had to. I hope you can understand."

I was a proud boy as I walked along in the twilight of the evening. I felt so good even my sore hands had stopped hurting. What boy wouldn't have been proud? Hadn't my little hounds treed and killed their first coon? Along about then I decided I was a full-fledged coon hunter.

Nearing our house, I saw the whole family had come out on the porch. My sisters came running, staring wide-eyed at the dead coon.

Laughing, Papa said, "Well, I see you got him."

"I sure did, Papa," I said. I held the coon up for all to see. Mama took one look at the lifeless body and winced.

"Billy," she said, "when I heard that big tree fall, it scared me half to death. I didn't know but what it had fallen on you."

"Aw, Mama," I said, "I was safe. Why, I backed way off to one side. It couldn't have fallen on me."

Mama just shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "Some times I wonder if all mothers have to go through this."

"Come on," Papa said, "I'll help you skin it."

While we were tacking the hide on the smoke-

house wall, I asked Papa if he had noticed any wind blowing that evening.

He thought a bit and said, "No, I don't believe I did. I've been out all day and I'm pretty sure I haven't noticed any wind. Why did you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know, Papa," I said, "but I thought something strange happened down in the bottoms this afternoon."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Papa. "What do you mean, 'something strange happened'?"

I told him about how my hands had gotten so sore I couldn't chop any more, and how I had asked for strength to finish the job.

"Well, what's so strange about that?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said, "but I didn't chop the big tree down. The wind blew it over."

"Why that's nothing," Papa said. "I've seen that happen a lot of times."

"It wasn't just the wind," I said. "It was the way it blew. It didn't touch another tree in the bottoms. I know because I looked around. The big tree was the only one touched by the wind. Do you think God heard my prayer? Do you think He helped me?"

Papa looked at the ground and scratched his head. In a sober voice, he said, "I don't know, Billy. I'm afraid I can't answer that. You must remember the big sycamore was the tallest tree in the bottoms. Maybe it was up there high enough to catch the wind where the others couldn't. No, I'm afraid I can't help you there. You'll have to decide for yourself."

It wasn't hard for me to decide. I was firmly convinced that I had been helped.

X

MAMA MADE ME A CAP OUT OF MY FIRST COON HIDE. I WAS as proud of it as Papa would've been if someone had given him a dozen Missouri mules. Mama said afterwards that she wished she hadn't made it for me because, in some way, wearing that cap must've affected my mind. I went coon crazy.

I was out after the ringtails every night. About the only time I didn't go hunting was when the weather was bad, and even then Mama all but had to hog-tie me.

What wonderful nights they were, running like a deer through the thick timber of the bottoms, tearing my way through stands of wild cane, climbing over drifts, and jumping logs, running, screaming, and yelling, "Who-e-e-e, get him, boy, get him," following the voices of my little hounds.

It wasn't too hard for a smart old coon to fool Old Dan, but there were none that prowled the riverbanks that could fool my Little Ann.

As Grandpa had predicted, the price of coonskins jumped sky-high. A good-size hide was worth from

four to ten dollars, depending on the grade and quality.

I kept the side of our smokehouse plastered with hides. Of course I would spread them out a little to cover more space. I always stretched them on the side facing the road, never on the back side. I wanted everyone in the country to see them.

The money earned from my furs was turned over to my father. I didn't care about it. I had what I wanted—my dogs. I supposed that Papa was saving it for something because I never saw anything new turn up around our home, but, like any young boy, I wasn't bothered by it and I asked no questions.

My whole life was wrapped up in my dogs. Everywhere I went they went along. There was only one place I didn't want them to go with me and that was to Grandpa's store. Other dogs were always there, and it seemed as if they all wanted to jump on Old Dan.

It got so about the only time I went to see my grandfather was when I had a bundle of fur to take to the store. This was always a problem. In every way I could, I would try to slip away from my dogs. Sometimes I swore that they could read my mind. It made no difference what I tried; I couldn't fool them.

One time I was sure I had outsmarted them. The day before I was to make one of my trips I took my furs out to the barn and hid them. The next morning I hung around the house for a while, and then nonchalantly whistled my way out to the barn. I climbed up in the loft and peeked through a crack. I could see them lying in front of their doghouse. They weren't even looking my way.

Taking my furs, I sneaked out through a back door and, walking like a tomcat, I made it to the timber. I climbed a small dogwood tree and looked back. They were still there and didn't seem to know what I'd done.

Feeling just about as smart as Sherlock Holmes, I headed for the store. I was walking along singing my lungs out when they came tearing out of the under-

brush, wiggling and twisting, and tickled to death to be with me. At first I was mad but one look at dancing Little Ann and all was forgiven. I sat down on my bundle of fur and laughed till I hurt all over. I could scold them a little but I could no more have whipped one of them than I could have kissed a girl. After all a boy just doesn't whip his dogs.

Grandpa always counted my furs carefully and marked something down on a piece of paper. I'd never seen him do this with other hunters and it got the best of my curiosity. One day while he was writing I asked him, "Why do you do that, Grandpa?" He looked at me over his glasses and said kind of sharp, "Never mind. I have my reasons."

When Grandpa talked to me like that I didn't push things any farther. Besides, it didn't make any difference to me if he marked on every piece of paper in the store.

I always managed to make my trips on Saturdays as that was "coon hunters' " day. I didn't have to stand around on the outside of the circle any more and listen to the coon hunters. I'd get right up in the middle and say my piece with the rest of them.

I didn't have to tell any whoppers for some of the things my dogs did were almost unbelievable anyhow. Oh, I guess I did make things a little bigger than they actually were but I never did figure a coon hunter told honest-to-goodness lies. He just kind of stretched things a little.

I could hold those coon hunters spellbound with some of my hunting tales. Grandpa would never say anything while I was telling my stories. He just puttered around the store with a silly little grin on his face. Once in a while when I got too far off the beaten path, he would come around and cram a bar of soap in my pocket. My face would get all red, I'd cut my story short, fly out the door, and head for home.

The coon hunters were always kidding me about my dogs. Some of the remarks I heard made me fighting mad. "I never saw hounds so small, but I guess

they are hounds, at least they look like it." "I don't believe Little Ann is half as smart as he says she is. She's so little those old coons think she's a rabbit. I bet she sneaks right up on them before they realize she's a dog." "Some of these nights a big old coon is going to carry her off to his den and raise some little coon puppies."

I always took their kidding with a smile on my face, but it made my blood boil like the water in Mama's teakettle. I had one way of shutting them up. "Let's all go in the store," I'd say, "and see who has the most hides in there."

It was true that my dogs were small, especially Little Ann. She could walk under an ordinary hound; in fact, she was a regular midget. If it had not been for her long ears, no one could have told that she was a hound. Her actions weren't those of a hunting hound. She was constantly playing. She would play with our chickens and young calves, with a piece of paper or a corn cob. What my little girl lacked in size, she made up in sweetness. She could make friends with a tom-cat.

● Old Dan was just the opposite. He strutted around with a belligerent and tough attitude. Although he wasn't a tall dog, he was heavy. His body was long and his chest broad and thick. His legs were short, big, and solid. The muscles in his body were hard and knotty. When he walked, they would twist and jerk under the skin.

He was a friendly dog. There were no strangers to him. He loved everyone. Yet he was a strange dog. He would not hunt with another hound, other than Little Ann, or another hunter, not even my father. The strangest thing about Old Dan was that he would not hunt, even with me, unless Little Ann was with him. I found this out the first night I tried it.

Little Ann had cut the pad of her right foot on a sharp jagged flint rock. It was a nasty cut. I made a little boot of leather and put it on her wounded foot.

To keep her from following me, I locked her in the cornercrib.

Two nights later I decided to take Old Dan hunting for a while. He followed me down to the river bottoms and disappeared in the thick timber. I waited and waited for him to strike a trail. Nothing happened. After about two hours, I called to him. He didn't come. I called and called. Disgusted, I gave up and went home.

Coming up through the barn lot, I saw him rolled up in a ball on the ground in front of the cornercrib. I immediately understood. I walked over and opened the door. He jumped up in the crib, smelled Little Ann's foot, twisted around in the shucks, and lay down by her side. As he looked at me, I read this message in his friendly gray eyes, "You could've done this a long time ago."

I never did know if Little Ann would hunt by herself or not. I am sure she would have, for she was a smart and understanding dog, but I never tried to find out.

Little Ann was my sisters' pet. They rubbed and scratched and petted her. They would take her down to the creek and give her baths. She loved it all.

If Mama wanted a chicken caught, she would call Little Ann. She would run the chicken down and hold it with her paws until Mama came. Not one feather would be harmed. Mama tried Old Dan once. Before she got the chicken, there wasn't much left but the feathers.

By some strange twist of nature, Little Ann was destined to go through life without being a mother. Perhaps it was because she was stunted in growth, or maybe because she was the runt in a large litter. That may have had something to do with it.

During the fur season, November through February, I was given complete freedom from work. Many times when I came home, the sun was high in the sky. After each hunt, I always took care of my dogs. The flint rocks and saw briars were hard on their feet.

With a bottle of peroxide and a can of salve I would doctor their wounds.

I never knew what to expect from Old Dan. I never saw a coon hound so determined or one that could get into so many predicaments. More than one time, it would have been the death of him if it hadn't been for smart Little Ann.

One night, not long after I had entered the bottoms, my dogs struck the trail of an old boar coon. He was a smart old fellow and had a sackful of tricks. He crossed the river time after time. Finally, swimming to the middle and staying in the swift current, he swam downstream.

Knowing he would have to come out somewhere, my dogs split up. Old Dan took the right side. Little Ann worked the other side. I came out of the bottoms onto a gravel bar and stood and watched them in the moonlight.

Little Ann worked downriver, and then she came up. I saw her when she passed me going up the bank, sniffing and searching for the trail. She came back to me. I patted her head, scratched her ears, and talked to her. She kept staring across the river to where Old Dan was searching for the trail.

She waded in and swam across to help him. I knew that the coon had not come out of the river on her side. If he had, she would have found the trail. I walked up to a riffle, pulled off my shoes, and waded across.

My dogs worked the riverbank, up and down. They circled far out into the bottoms. I could hear the loud snuffing of Old Dan. He was bewildered and mad. I was getting a thrill from it all, as I had never seen them fooled like this.

Old Dan gave up on his side, piled into the river, and swam across to the side Little Ann had worked. I knew that it was useless for him to do that.

I was on the point of giving up, calling them to me, and going elsewhere to hunt, when I heard the bawl of Little Ann. I couldn't believe what I heard.

She wasn't bawling on a trail. She was sounding the tree bark. I hurried down the bank.

There was a loud splash. I saw Old Dan swimming back. By this time, Little Ann was really singing a song. In the bright moonlight, I could see Old Dan clearly. His powerful front legs were churning the water.

Then I saw a sight that makes a hunter's heart swell with pride. Still swimming, Old Dan raised his head high out of the water and bawled. He couldn't wait until he reached the bank to tell Little Ann he was coming. From far out in the river he told her.

Reaching the shallows, he plowed out of the river onto a sand bar. Not even taking time to shake the water from his body, again he raised his head and bawled, and tore out down the bank.

In a trot, I followed, whooping to let them know I was coming. Before I reached the tree, Old Dan's deep voice was making the timber shake.

The tree was a large birch, standing right on the bank of the river. The swift current had eaten away at the footing, causing it to lean. The lower branches of the tree dangled in the water.

I saw how the smart old coon had pulled his trick. Coming in toward the bank from midstream, he had caught the dangling limbs and climbed up. Exhausted from the long swim, he stayed there in the birch thinking he had outsmarted my dogs. I couldn't understand how Little Ann had found him.

It was impossible to fall the tree toward the bottoms. It was too much off balance. I did the next best thing. I cut a long elder switch. Unbuckling one of my suspenders, I tied it to the end and climbed the tree.

The coon was sitting in a fork of a limb. Taking my switch, I whopped him a good one and out he came. He sailed out over the river. With a loud splash, he hit the water and swam for the other side. My dogs jumped off the bank after him. They were no match against his expert swimming. On reaching the other bank, he ran downriver.

Climbing down out of the tree, I picked up my ax and lantern, and trotted down to another riffle and waded across. I could tell by the bawling of my dogs, they were close to the coon. He would have to climb a tree, or be caught on the ground.

All at once their voices stopped. I stood still and waited for them to bawl treed. Nothing happened. Thinking the coon had taken to the river again, I waited to give them time to reach the opposite bank. I waited and waited. I could hear nothing. By then I knew he had not crossed over. I thought perhaps they had caught him on the ground. I hurried on.

I came to a point where a slough of crystal-clear water ran into the river. On the other side was a bluff. I could hear one of my dogs over there. As I watched and waited, I heard a dog jump in the water. It was Little Ann. She swam across and came up to me. Staying with me for just a second, she jumped in the slough and swam back to the other side.

I could hear her sniffing and whining. I couldn't figure out where Old Dan was. By squatting down and holding the lantern high over my head, I could dimly see the opposite bank. Little Ann was running up and down. I noticed she always stayed in one place of about twenty-five yards, never leaving that small area.

She ran down to the water's edge and stared out into the slough. The horrible thought came that Old Dan had drowned. I knew a big coon was capable of drowning a dog in water by climbing on his head and forcing him under.

As fast as I could run, I circled the slough, climbed up over the bluff, and came down to where Little Ann was. She was hysterical, running up and down the bank and whining.

I tied my lantern on a long pole, held it out over the water, and looked for Old Dan's body. I could see clearly in the clear spring waters, but I couldn't see my dog anywhere. I sat down on the bank, buried my face in my hands, and cried. I was sure he was gone.

Several minutes passed, and all that time Little

Ann had never stopped. Running here and there along the bank, she kept sniffing and whining.

I heard when she started digging. I looked around. She was ten feet from the water's edge. I got up and went over to her. She was digging in a small hole about the size of a big apple. It was the air hole for a muskrat den.

I pulled Little Ann away from the hole, knelt down, and put my ear to it. I could hear something, and feel a vibration in the ground. It was an eerie sound and seemed to be coming from far away. I listened. Finally I understood what the noise was.

It was the voice of Old Dan. Little Ann had opened the hole up enough with her digging so his voice could be heard faintly. In some way he had gotten into that old muskrat den.

I knew that down under the bank, in the water, the entrance to the den could be found. Rolling up my sleeve, I tried to find it with my hand. I had no luck. It was too far down.

There was only one thing to do. Leaving my ax and lantern, I ran for home. Picking up a long-handled shovel, I hurried back.

The sun was high in the sky before I had dug Old Dan out. He was a sight to see, nothing but mud from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail. I held on to his collar and led him down to the river to wash him off. The water there was much warmer than the cold spring water of the slough.

After washing him, I turned him loose. Right back to the hole he ran. Little Ann was already digging. I knew the coon was still there. Working together, we dug him out.

After the coon was killed, I saw what had made him so smart. His right front foot was twisted and shriveled. At one time he must have been caught in a trap and had pulled himself free. He was an old coon. His face was almost white. He was big and heavy and had beautiful fur.

Tired, muddy, wet, and hungry, I started for home.

I've often wondered how Old Dan got into that old muskrat den. Perhaps there was another entrance I had overlooked. I'll never know.

One night, far back in the mountains, in a place called "The Cyclone Timber," Old Dan really pulled a good one.

Many years before my time, a terrible cyclone had ripped its way through the mountains, leaving its scar in the form of fallen timber, twisted and snarled. The path of the cyclone was several miles wide and several miles long. It was wonderful place to hunt as it abounded with game.

My dogs had struck the trail of a coon about an hour before. They had really been warming him up. I knew it was about time for him to take up a tree, and sure enough, I heard the deep voice of Old Dan telling the world he had a coon up a tree.

I was trotting along, going to them, when his voice stopped. I could hear Little Ann, but not Old Dan. I wondered why, and was a little scared, for I just knew something had happened. Then I heard his voice. It seemed louder than it had been before. I felt much better.

When I came up to the tree I thought Little Ann had treed Old Dan. She was sitting on her haunches staring up and bawling the tree bark. There, a good fifteen feet from the ground, with his hind legs planted firmly in the center of a big limb, and his front feet against the trunk of the tree, stood Old Dan, bawling for all he was worth.

Above him some eight or nine feet was a baby coon. I was glad it was a young one, for if it had been an old one, he would have jumped out. Old Dan would have followed, and he surely would have broken all of his legs.

From where I was standing, I could see it was impossible for Old Dan to have climbed the tree. It was dead and more of an old snag than a tree, with

limbs that were crooked and twisted. The bark had rotted away and fallen off, leaving the trunk bare and slick as glass. It was a good ten feet up to the first limb. I couldn't figure out how Old Dan had climbed that tree. There had to be a solution somewhere.

Walking around to the other side, I saw how he had accomplished his feat. There in the bottom was a large hole. The old tree was hollow. Stepping back, I looked up and could see another hole, which had been hidden from me because of Old Dan's body.

He had simply crawled into the hole at the bottom, climbed up the hollow of the tree, and worked his way out on the limb. In some way he had turned around and reared up, placing his front feet against the trunk.

There he was. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't cut the tree down and I was afraid to climb it for fear I would scare the coon into jumping out. If he did, Old Dan would jump, too, and break his legs.

I ran plan after plan around in my mind. None would work. I finally came to the conclusion that I had to climb the tree and get ahold of that crazy dog. I blew out my lantern, pulled off my shoes and socks, and started shinnying up the tree. I prayed that the coon wouldn't jump out.

Inching along, being as quiet as I could, I made it up to Old Dan and grabbed his collar. I sat down on the limb, and held him tight. He would bawl now and then, and all but burst my eardrums. I couldn't drop him to the ground, and I couldn't climb down with him. I couldn't sit there on that limb and hold him all night. I would be no better off when daylight came.

Glancing at the hole by my side gave me the solution to my problem. I thought, "If he came out of this hole, he can go back in it."

That was the way I got my dog down from the tree. This had its problems, too. In the first place, Old Dan didn't want to be put in the hole head first. By scolding, pushing, shoving, and squeezing, I finally got him started on his way.

Like a fool, I sat there on the limb, waiting to see him come out at the bottom, and come out he did. Turning around, bawling as he did, right back in the hole he went. There was nothing I could do but sit and wait. I understood why his voice had stopped for a while. He just took time out to climb a tree.

Putting my ear to the hole, I could hear him coming. Grunting and clawing, up he came. I helped him out of the hole, turned him around, and crammed him back in. That time I wasn't too gentle with my work. I was tired of sitting on the limb, and my bare feet were getting cold.

I started down the same time he did. He beat me down. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him turn around and head back for the hole. I wasn't far from the ground so I let go. The flint rocks didn't feel too good to my feet when I landed.

I jumped to the hole just in time to see the tip end of his long tail disappearing. I grabbed it. Holding on with one hand, I worked his legs down with my other, and pulled him out. I stopped his tree-climbing by cramming rocks and chunks into the hole.

How the coon stayed in the tree, I'll never know, but stay he did. With a well-aimed rock, I scared him out. Old Dan satisfied his lust to kill.

I started for home. I'd had all the hunting I wanted for that night.

XI

I HAD OFTEN WONDERED WHAT OLD DAN WOULD DO IF LITTLE Ann got into some kind of a predicament. One night I got my answer.

For several days a northern blizzard had been blowing. It was a bad one. The temperature dropped down to ten below. The storm started with a slow cold drizzle and then sleet. When the wind started blowing, everything froze, leaving the ground as slick as glass.

Trapped indoors, I was as nervous as a fish out of water. I told Mama I guessed it was just going to storm all winter.

She laughed and said, "I don't think it will, but it does look like it will last for a while."

She ruffled up my hair and kissed me between the eyes. This did rile me up. I didn't like to be kissed like that. It seemed that I could practically rub my skin off and still feel it, all wet and sticky, and kind of burning.

Sometime on the fifth night, the storm blew itself out and it snowed about three inches. The next morning I went out to my doghouse. Scraping the snow

away from the two-way door, I stuck my head in. It was as warm as an oven. I got my face washed all over by Little Ann. Old Dan's tail thumped out a tune on the wall.

I told them to be ready because we were going hunting that night. I knew the old ringtails would be hungry and stirring for they had been denned up during the storm.

That evening as I was leaving the house, Papa said, "Billy, be careful tonight. It's slick down under the snow, and it would be easy to twist an ankle or break a leg."

I told him I would and that I wasn't going far, just down back of our fields in the bottoms.

"Well, anyway," he said, "be careful. There'll be no moon tonight and you're going to see some fog next to the river."

Walking through our fields I saw my father was right about it being slick and dark. Several times I slipped and sat down. I couldn't see anything beyond the glow of my lantern, but I wasn't worried. My light was a good one, and Mama had insisted that I make two little leather pouches to cover the blades of my ax.

Just before I reached the timber, Old Dan shook the snow from the underbrush with his deep voice. I stopped and listened. He bawled again. The deep bass tones rolled around under the tall sycamores, tore their way out of the thick timber, traveled out over the fields, and slammed up against the foothills. There they seemed to break up and die away in the mountains.

Old Dan was working the trail slowly and I knew why. He would never line out until Little Ann was running by his side. I thought she would never get there. When she did, her beautiful voice made the blood pound in my temples. I felt the excitement of the hunt as it ate its way into my body. Taking a deep breath, I reared back and whooped as loud as I could.

The coon ran upriver for a way and then, cutting

out of the bottoms, he headed for the mountains. I stood and listened until their voices went out of hearing. Slipping and sliding, I started in the direction I had last heard them. About halfway to the foothills I heard them coming back.

Somewhere in the rugged mountains, the coon had turned and headed toward the river. It was about time for him to play out a few tricks and I was wondering what he would do. I knew it would be hard for him to hide his trail with snow on the ground, and I realized later that the smart old coon knew this, too.

As the voices of my dogs grew louder, I could tell that they were coming straight toward me. Once I started to blow out my lantern, thinking that maybe I could see them when they crossed our field, but I realized I didn't stand a chance of seeing the race in the skunk-black night.

Down out of the mountains they brought him, singing a hound-dog song on his heels. The coon must have scented me, or seen my lantern. He cut to my right and ran between our house and me. I heard screaming and yelling from my sisters. My father started whooping.

I knew my whole family was out on the porch listening to the beautiful voices of my little red hounds. I felt as tall as the tallest sycamore on the riverbank. I yelled as loud as I could. Again I heard the squealing of my sisters and the shouts of my father.

The deep "Ou-ou-ou's" of Old Dan and the sharp "Aw-aw-aw-aw's" of Little Ann bored a hole in the inky-black night. The vibrations rolled and quivered in the icy silence.

The coon was heading for the river. I could tell my dogs were crowding him, and wondered if he'd make it to the water. I was hoping he wouldn't, for I didn't want to wade the cold water unless I had to do it.

I figured the smart old coon had a reason for turning and coming back to the river and wondered

what trick he had in mind. I remembered something my grandfather had told me. He said, "Never underestimate the cunning of an old river coon. When the nights are dark and the ground is frozen and slick, they can pull some mean tricks on a hound. Sometimes the tricks can be fatal."

I was halfway through the fog-covered bottoms when the voices of my dogs stopped. I stood still, waited, and listened. A cold silence settled over the bottoms. I could hear the snap and crack of sap-frozen limbs. From far back in the flinty hills, the long, lonesome howl of a timber wolf floated down in the silent night. Across the river I heard a cow moo. I knew the sound was coming from the Lowery place.

Not being able to hear the voices of my dogs gave me an uncomfortable feeling. I whooped and waited for one of them to bawl. As I stood waiting I realized something was different in the bottoms. Something was missing.

I wasn't worried about my dogs. I figured that the coon had pulled some trick and sooner or later they would unravel the trail. But the feeling that something was just not right had me worried.

I whooped several times but still could get no answer. Stumbling, slipping, and sliding, I started on. Reaching the river, I saw it was frozen over. I realized what my strange uneasy feeling was. I had not been able to hear the sound of the water.

As I stood listening I heard a gurgling out in the middle of the stream. The river wasn't frozen all the way across. The still eddy waters next to the banks had frozen, but out in the middle, where the current was swift, the water was running, leaving a trough in the ice pack. The gurgling sound I had heard was the swift current as it sucked its way through the channel.

The last time I had heard my dogs they were downstream from me. I walked on, listening.

I hadn't gone far when I heard Old Dan. What I heard froze the blood in my veins. He wasn't bawling on a trail or giving the tree bark. It was one, long,

continuous cry. In his deep voice there seemed to be a pleading cry for help. Scared, worried, and with my heart beating like a churn dasher, I started toward the sound.

I almost passed him but with another cry he let me know where he was. He was out on the ice pack. I couldn't see him for the fog. I called to him and he answered with a low whine. Again I called his name. This time he came to me.

He wasn't the same dog. His tail was between his legs and his head was bowed down. He stopped about seven feet from me. Sitting down on the ice, he raised his head and howled the most mournful cry I had ever heard. Turning around, he trotted back out on the ice and disappeared in the fog.

I knew something had happened to Little Ann. I called her name. She answered with a pleading cry. Although I couldn't see her, I guessed what had happened. The coon had led them to the river. Running out on the ice, he had leaped across the trough. My dogs, hot on the trail, had followed. Old Dan, a more powerful dog than Little Ann, had made his leap. Little Ann had not made it. Her small feet had probably slipped on the slick ice and she had fallen into the icy waters. Old Dan, seeing the fate of his little friend, had quit the chase and come back to help her. The smart old coon had pulled his trick, and a deadly one it was.

I had to do something. She would never be able to get out by herself. It was only a matter of time until her body would be paralyzed by the freezing water.

Laying my ax down, I held my lantern out in front of me and stepped out on the ice. It started cracking and popping. I jumped back to the bank. Although it was thick enough to hold the light weight of my dogs, it would never hold me.

Little Ann started whining and begging for help. I went all to pieces and started crying. Something had to be done and done quickly or my little dog was lost. I thought of running home for a rope or for my father,

but I knew she couldn't last until I got back. I was desperate. It was impossible for me to swim in the freezing water. I wouldn't last for a minute. She cried again, begging for the one thing I couldn't give her, help.

I thought, "If only I could see her maybe I could figure out some way I could help."

Looking at my lantern gave me an idea. I ran up the bank about thirty feet, turned, and looked back. I could see the light, not well, but enough for what I had in mind. I grabbed my lantern and ax and ran for the bottoms.

I was looking for a stand of wild cane. After what seemed like ages, I found it. With the longest one I could find, I hurried back. After it was trimmed and the limber end cut off, I hung the lantern by the handle on the end of it and started easing it out on the ice.

I saw Old Dan first. He was sitting close to the edge of the trough, looking down. Then I saw her. I groaned at her plight. All I could see was her head and her small front paws. Her claws were spread out and digging into the ice. She knew if she ever lost that hold she was gone.

Old Dan raised his head and howled. Hound though he was, he knew it was the end of the trail for his little pal.

I wanted to get my light as close to Little Ann as I could, but my pole was a good eight feet short. Setting the lantern down, I eased the pole from under the handle, I thought, "I'm no better off than I was before. In fact I'm worse off. Now I can see when the end comes."

Little Ann cried again. I saw her claws slip on the ice. Her body settled lower in the water. Old Dan howled and started fidgeting. He knew the end was close.

I didn't exactly know when I started out toward my dog. I had taken only two steps when the ice broke. I twisted my body and fell toward the bank.

Just as my hand closed on a root I thought my feet touched bottom, but I wasn't sure. As I pulled myself out I felt the numbing cold creep over my legs.

It looked so hopeless. There didn't seem to be any way I could save her.

At the edge of the water stood a large sycamore. I got behind it, anything to blot out that heartbreaking scene. Little Ann, thinking I had deserted her, started crying. I couldn't stand it.

I opened my mouth to call Old Dan. I wanted to tell him to come on and we'd go home as there was nothing we could do. The words just wouldn't come out. I couldn't utter a sound. I lay my face against the icy cold bark of the sycamore. I thought of the prayer I had said when I had asked God to help me get two hound pups. I knelt down and sobbed out a prayer. I asked for a miracle which would save the life of my little dog. I promised all the things that a young boy could if only He would help me.

Still saying my prayer and making promises, I heard a sharp metallic sound. I jumped up and stepped away from the tree. I was sure the noise I heard was made by a rattling chain on the front end of a boat.

I shouted as loud as I could. "Over here. I need help. My dog is drowning."

I waited for an answer. All I could hear were the cries of Little Ann.

Again I hollered. "Over here. Over on the bank. Can you see my light? I need help. Please hurry."

I held my breath waiting for an answering shout. I shivered from the freezing cold of my wet shoes and overalls. A straining silence settled over the river. A feathery rustle swished by in the blackness. A flock of low-flying ducks had been disturbed by my loud shouts. I strained my ears for some sound. Now and then I could hear the lapping slap of the ice-cold water as it swirled its way through the trough.

I glanced to Little Ann. She was still holding on

but I saw her paws were almost at the edge. I knew her time was short.

I couldn't figure out what I had heard. The sound was made by metal striking metal, but what was it? What could have caused it?

I looked at my ax. It couldn't have made the sound as it was too close to me. The noise had come from out in the river.

When I looked at my lantern I knew that it had made the strange sound. I had left the handle standing straight up when I had taken the pole away. Now it was down. For some unknown reason the stiff wire handle had twisted in the sockets and dropped. As it had fallen it had struck the metal frame, making the sharp metallic sound I had heard.

As I stared at the yellow glow of my light, the last bit of hope faded away. I closed my eyes, intending to pray again for the help I so desperately needed. Then like a blinding red flash the message of the lantern bored its way into my brain. There was my miracle. There was the way to save my little dog. In the metallic sound I had heard were my instructions. They were so plain I couldn't help but understand them. The bright yellow flame started flickering and dancing. It seemed to be saying, "Hurry. You know what to do."

Faster than I had ever moved in my life I went to work. With a stick I measured the water in the hole where my feet had broken through the ice. I was right. My foot had touched bottom. Eighteen inches down I felt the soft mud.

With my pole I fished the lantern back to the bank. I took the handle off, straightened it out, and bent a hook in one end. With one of my shoelaces I tied the wire to the end of the cane pole. I left the hook sticking out about six inches beyond the end of it.

I started shouting encouragement to Little Ann. I told her to hang on and not to give up for I was going to save her. She answered with a low cry.

With the hook stuck in one of the ventilating holes in the top of my light, I lifted it back out on the ice and set it down. After a little wiggling and pushing, I worked the hook loose and laid the pole down.

I took off my clothes, picked up my ax, and stepped down into the hole in the icy water. It came to my knees. Step by step, breaking the ice with my ax, I waded out.

The water came up to my hips, and then to my waist. The cold bite of it took my breath away. I felt my body grow numb. I couldn't feel my feet at all but I knew they were moving. When the water reached my armpits I stopped and worked my pole toward Little Ann. Stretching my arms as far out as I could, I saw I was still a foot short. Closing my eyes and gritting my teeth, I moved on. The water reached my chin.

I was close enough. I started hooking at the collar of Little Ann. Time after time I felt the hook almost catch. I saw I was fishing on a wrong angle. She had settled so low in the water I couldn't reach her collar. Raising my arms above my head so the pole would be on a slant I kept hooking and praying. The seconds ticked by. I strained for one more inch. The muscles in my arms grew numb from the weight of the pole.

Little Ann's claws slipped again. I thought she was gone. At the very edge of the ice, she caught again. All I could see now were her small red paws and her nose and eyes.

By Old Dan's actions I could tell he understood and wanted to help. He ran over close to my pole and started digging at the ice. I whopped him with the cane. That was the only time in my life I ever hit my dog. I had to get him out of the way so I could see what I was doing.

Just when I thought my task was impossible, I felt the hook slide under the tough leather. It was none too soon.

As gently as I could I dragged her over the rim of

the ice. At first I thought she was dead. She didn't move. Old Dan started whining and licking her face and ears. She moved her head. I started talking to her. She made an effort to stand but couldn't. Her muscles were paralyzed and the blood had long since ceased to flow.

At the movement of Little Ann, Old Dan threw a fit. He started barking and jumping. His long red tail fanned the air.

Still holding onto my pole, I tried to take a step backward. My feet wouldn't move. A cold gripping fear came over me. I thought my legs were frozen. I made another effort to lift my leg. It moved. I realized that my feet were stuck in the soft muddy bottom.

I started backing out, dragging the body of my little dog. I couldn't feel the pole in my hands. When my feet touched the icy bank, I couldn't feel that either. All the feeling in my body was gone.

I wrapped Little Ann in my coat and hurried into my clothes. With the pole I fished my light back.

Close by was a large drift. I climbed up on top of it and dug a hole down through the ice and snow until I reached the dry limbs. I poured half of the oil in my lantern down into the hole and dropped in a match. In no time I had a roaring fire.

I laid Little Ann close to the warm heat and went to work. Old Dan washed her head with his warm red tongue while I massaged and rubbed her body.

I could tell by her cries when the blood started circulating. Little by little her strength came back. I stood her on her feet and started walking her. She was weak and wobbly but I knew she would live. I felt much better and breathed a sigh of relief.

After drying myself out the best I could, I took the lantern handle from the pole, bent it back to its original position, and put it back on the lantern. Holding the light out in front of me, I looked at it. The bright metal gleamed in the firelight glow.

I started talking to it. I said, "Thanks, old lantern, more than you'll ever know. I'll always take care of

you. Your globe will always be clean and there'll never be any rust or dirt on your frame."

I knew if it had not been for the miracle of the lantern, my little dog would have met her death on that night. Her grave would have been the cold icy waters of the Illinois River.

Out in the river I could hear the cold water gurgling in the icy trough. It seemed to be angry. It hissed and growled as it tore its way through the channel. I shuddered to think of what could have happened.

Before I left for home, I walked back to the sycamore tree. Once again I said a prayer, but this time the words were different. I didn't ask for a miracle. In every way a young boy could, I said "thanks." My second prayer wasn't said with just words. All of my heart and soul was in it.

On my way home I decided not to say anything to my mother and father about Little Ann's accident. I knew it would scare Mama and she might stop my hunting.

Reaching our house, I didn't hang the lantern in its usual place. I took it to my room and set it in a corner with the handle standing up.

The next morning I started sneezing and came down with a terrible cold. I told Mama I had gotten my feet wet. She scolded me a little and started doctoring me.

For three days and nights I stayed home. All this time I kept checking the handle of the lantern. My sisters shook the house from the roof to the floor with their playing and romping, but the handle never did fall.

I went to my mother and asked her if God answered prayers every time one was said. She smiled and said, "No, Billy, not every time. He only answers the ones that are said from the heart. You have to be sincere and believe in Him."

She wanted to know why I had asked.

I said, "Oh, I just wondered, and wanted to know."

She came over and straightened my suspenders, saying, "That was a very nice question for my little Daniel Boone to ask."

Bending over, she started kissing me. I finally squirmed away from her, feeling as wet as a dirt dauber's nest. My mother never could kiss me like a fellow should be kissed. Before she was done I was kissed all over. It always made me feel silly and baby-like. I tried to tell her that a coon hunter wasn't supposed to be kissed that way, but Mama never could understand things like that.

I stomped out of the house to see how my dogs were.