

XII

THE FAME OF MY DOGS SPREAD ALL OVER OUR PART OF THE Ozarks. They were the best in the country. No coon hunter came into my grandfather's store with as many pelts as I did. Grandpa never overlooked an opportunity to brag. He told everyone the story of my dogs, and the part he had played in getting them.

Many was the time some farmer, coming to our home, would say, "Your Grandpa was telling me you got three big coons over in Pea Vine Hollow the other night." I would listen, knowing I only got one, or maybe none, but Grandpa was my pal. If he said I caught ten in one tree, it was just that way.

Because of my grandfather's bragging, and his firm belief in my dogs and me, a terrible thing happened.

One morning, while having breakfast, Mama said to Papa, "I'm almost out of corn meal. Do you think you can go to the mill today?"

Papa said, "I intended to butcher a hog. We're about out of meat." Looking at me, he said, "Shell a sack of corn. Take one of the mules and go to the mill for your mother."

With the help of my sisters, we shelled the corn. Throwing it over our mule's back, I started for the store.

On arriving at the millhouse, I tied my mule to the hitching post, took my corn, and set it by the door. I walked over to the store and told Grandpa I wanted to get some corn ground.

He said, "I'll be with you in just a minute."

As I was waiting, I heard a horse coming. Looking out, I saw who it was and didn't like what I saw. It was the two youngest Pritchard boys. I had run into them on several occasions during pie suppers and dances.

The Pritchards were a large family that lived upriver about five miles. As in most small country communities, there is one family that no one likes. The Pritchards were it. Tales were told that they were bootleggers, thieves, and just all-round "no-accounts." The story had gone round that Old Man Pritchard had killed a man somewhere in Missouri before moving to our part of the country.

Rubin was two years older than I, big and husky for his age. He never had much to say. He had mean-looking eyes that were set far back in his rugged face. They were smoky-hued and unblinking, as if the eyelids were paralyzed. I had heard that once he had cut a boy with a knife in a fight over at the sawmill.

Rainie was the youngest, about my age. He had the meanest disposition of any boy I had ever known. Because of this he was disliked by young and old. Wherever Rainie went, trouble seemed to follow. He was always wanting to bet, and would bet on anything. He was nervous, and could never seem to stand still.

Once at my grandfather's store, I had given him a piece of candy. Snatching it out of my hand, he ate it and then sneered at me and said it wasn't any good. During a pie supper one night, he wanted to bet a dime that he could whip me.

My mother told me always to be kind of Rainie, that he couldn't help being the way he was. I asked,

"Why?" She said it was because his brothers were always picking on him and beating him.

On entering the store, they stopped and glared at me. Rubin walked over to the counter. Rainie came over to me.

Leering at me, he said, "I'd like to make a bet with you."

I told him I didn't want to bet.

He asked if I was scared.

"No. I just don't want to bet," I said.

His neck and ears looked as though they hadn't been washed in months. His ferret-like eyes kept darting here and there. Glancing down to his hands, I saw the back of his right sleeve was stiff and starchy from the constant wiping of his nose.

He saw I was looking him over, and asked if I liked what I saw.

I started to say, "No," but didn't, turned, and walked away a few steps.

Rubin ordered some chewing tobacco.

"Aren't you a little young to be chewing?" Grandpa asked.

"Ain't for me. It's for my dad," Rubin growled.

Grandpa handed two plugs to him. He paid for it, turned around, and handed one plug to Rainie. Holding the other up in front of him, he looked it over. Looking at Grandpa, he gnawed at one corner of it.

Grandpa mumbled something about how kids were brought up these days. He came from behind the counter, saying to me, "Let's go grind that corn."

The Pritchard boys made no move to follow us out of the store.

"Come on," Grandpa said. "I'm going to lock up till I get this corn ground."

"We'll just stay here. I want to look at some of the shirts," said Rubin.

"No, you won't," said Grandpa. "Come on, I'm going to lock up."

Begrudgingly, they walked out.

I helped Grandpa start the mill and we pro-

ceeded to grind the corn. The Pritchard boys had followed us and were standing looking on.

Rainie walked over to me. "I hear you have some good hounds," he said.

I told him I had the best in the country. If he didn't believe me, he could just ask my grandfather.

He just leered at me. "I don't think they're half as good as you say they are," he said. "Bet our old blue tick hound can out-hunt both of them."

I laughed, "Ask Grandpa who brings in the most hides."

"I wouldn't believe him. He's crooked," he said.

I let him know right quick that my grandfather wasn't crooked.

"He's a storekeeper, ain't he?" he said.

I glanced over at Grandpa. He had heard the remark made by Rainie. His friendly old face was as red as a turkey gobbler's wattle.

The last of my corn was just going through the grinding stones. Grandpa pushed a lever to one side, shutting off the power. He came over and said to Rainie, "What do you do? Just go around looking for trouble. What do you want, a fight?"

Rubin sidled over. "This ain't none of your business," he said. "Besides, Rainie's not looking for a fight. We just want to make a bet with him."

Grandpa glared at Rubin. "Any bet you would make sure would be a good one all right. What kind of a bet?"

Rubin spat a mouthful of tobacco juice on the clean floor. He said, "Well, we've heard so much about them hounds of his, we just think it's a lot of talk and lies. We'd like to make a little bet; say about two dollars."

I had never seen my old grandfather so mad. The red had left his face. In its place was a sickly, paste-gray color. The kind old eyes behind the glasses burned with a fire I had never seen.

In a loud voice, he asked, "Bet on what?"

Rubin spat again. Grandpa's eyes followed the

brown stain in its arch until it landed on the clean floor and splattered.

With a leering grin on his ugly, dirty face, Rubin said, "Well, we got an old coon up in our part of the country that's been there a long time. Ain't no dog yet ever been smart enough to tree him, and I—"

Rainie broke into the conversation, "He ain't just an ordinary coon. He's an old-timer. Folks call him the 'ghost coon.' Believe me, he is a ghost. He just runs hounds long enough to get them all warmed up, then climbs a tree and disappears. Our old blue hound has treed him more times than—"

Rubin told Rainie to shut up and let him do the talking. Looking over at me, he said, "What do you say? Want to bet two dollars your hounds can tree him?"

I looked at my grandfather, but he didn't help me.

I told Rubin I didn't want to bet, but I was pretty sure my dogs could tree the ghost coon.

Rainie butted in again, "What's the matter? You 'yellow'?"

I felt the hot blood rush into my face. My stomach felt like something alive was crawling in it. I doubled up my right fist and was on the point of hitting Rainie in one of his eyes when I felt my grandfather's hand on my shoulder.

I looked up. His eyes flashed as he looked at me. A strange little smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth. The big artery in his neck was pounding out and in. It reminded me of a young bird that had fallen out of a nest and lay dying on the ground.

Still looking at me, he reached back and took his billfold from his pocket, saying, "Let's call that bet." Turning to Rubin, he said, "I'm going to let him call your bet, but now you listen. If you boys take him up there to hunt the ghost coon, and jump on him and beat him up, you're sure going to hear from me. I don't mean maybe. I'll have both of you taken to

Tahlequah and put in jail. You had better believe that."

Rubin saw he had pushed my grandfather far enough. Backing up a couple of steps, he said, "We're not going to jump on him. All we want to do is make a bet."

Grandpa handed me two one-dollar bills, saying to Rubin, "You hold your money and he can hold his. If you lose, you had better pay off." Looking back to me, he said, "Son, if you lose, pay off."

I nodded my head.

I asked Rubin when he wanted me to come up for the hunt.

He thought a minute. "You know where that old log slide comes out from the hills onto the road?" he asked.

I nodded.

"We'll meet you there tomorrow night about dark," he said.

It was fine with me, I said, but I told him not to bring his hounds because mine wouldn't hunt with other dogs.

He said he wouldn't.

I agreed to bring my ax and lantern.

As they turned to leave, Rainie smirked. "Sucker!" he said.

I made no reply.

After the Pritchard boys had gone, my grandfather looked at me and said, "Son, I have never asked another man for much, but I sure want you to catch the ghost coon."

I told him if the ghost coon made one track in the river bottoms, my dogs would get him.

Grandpa laughed.

"You'd better be getting home. It's getting late and your mother is waiting for the corn meal," he said.

I could hear him chuckling as he walked toward his store. I thought to myself, "There goes the best grandpa a boy ever had."

Lifting the sack of meal to the back of my old mule, I started for home. All the way, I kept thinking of Old Dan, Little Ann, ghost coons, and the two ugly, dirty Pritchard boys. I decided not to tell my mother and father anything about the hunt for I knew Mama wouldn't approve of anything I had to do with the Pritchards.

The following evening I arrived at the designated spot early. I sat down by a red oak tree to wait. I called Little Ann over to me and had a good talk with her. I told her how much I loved her, scratched her back, and looked at the pads of her feet.

"Sweetheart," I said, "you must do something for me tonight. I want you to tree the ghost coon for it means so much to Grandpa and me."

She seemed to understand and answered by washing my face and hands.

I tried to talk to Old Dan, but I may as well have talked to a stump for all the attention he paid to me. He kept walking around sniffing here and there. He couldn't understand why we were waiting. He was wanting to hunt.

Rubin and Rainie showed up just at dark. Both had sneers on their faces.

"Are you ready?" Rubin asked.

"Yes," I said, and asked him which way was the best to go.

"Let's go downriver a way and work up," he said. "We're sure to strike him coming upriver, and that way we've got the wind in our favor."

"Are these the hounds that we've been hearing so much about?" Rainie asked.

I nodded.

"They look too little to be any good," he said.

I told him dynamite came in little packages.

He asked me if I had my two dollars.

"Yes," I said.

He wanted to see my money. I showed it to him. Rubin, not to be outdone, showed me his.

We crossed an old field and entered the river bot-

toms. By this time it was quite dark. I lit my lantern and asked which one wanted to carry my ax.

"It's yours," Rainie said. "You carry it."

Not wanting to argue, I carried both the lantern and the ax.

Rainie started telling me how stingy and crooked my grandfather was. I told him I hadn't come to have any trouble or to fight. All I wanted to do was to hunt the ghost coon. If there was going to be any trouble, I would just call my dogs and go home.

Rubin had a nickel's worth of sense, but Rainie had none at all. Rubin told him if he didn't shut up, he was going to bloody his nose. That shut Rainie up.

Old Dan opened up first. It was a beautiful thing to hear. The deep tones of his voice rolled in the silent night.

A bird in a canebrake on our right started chirping. A big swamp rabbit came running down the riverbank as if all hell was close to his heels. A bunch of mallards, feeding in the shallows across the river, took flight with frightened quacks. A feeling that only a hunter knows slowly crept over my body. I whooped to my dogs, urging them on.

Little Ann came in. Her bell-like tones blended with Old Dan's, in perfect rhythm. We stood and listened to the beautiful music, the deep-throated notes of hunting hounds on the hot-scented trail of a river coon.

Rubin said, "If he crosses the river up at the Buck Ford, it's the ghost coon, as that's the way he always runs."

We stood and listened. Sure enough, the voices of my dogs were silent for a few minutes. Old Dan, a more powerful swimmer than Little Ann, was the first to open up after crossing over. She was close behind him.

Rubin said, "That's him, all right. That's the ghost coon."

They crossed the river again.

We waited.

Rainie said, "You may as well get your money out now."

I told him just to wait a while, and I'd show him the ghost coon's hide.

This brought a loud laugh from Rainie, which sounded like someone had dropped an empty bucket on a gravel bar and then had kicked it.

The wily old coon crossed the river several times, but couldn't shake my dogs from his trail. He cut out from the bottoms, walked a rail fence, and jumped from it into a thick canebrake. He piled into an old slough. Where it emptied into the river, he swam to the middle. Doing opposite to what most coons do, which is swim downstream, he swam upstream. He stopped at an old drift in the middle of it.

Little Ann found him. When she jumped him from the drift, Old Dan was far downriver searching for the trail. If he could have gotten there in time, it would have been the last of the ghost coon, but Little Ann couldn't do much by herself in the water. He fought his way free from her, swam to our side, and ran upstream.

I could hear Old Dan coming through the bottoms on the other side, bawling at every jump. I could feel the driving power in his voice. We heard him when he hit the water to cross over. It sounded like a cow had jumped in.

Little Ann was warming up the ghost coon. I could tell by her voice that she was close to him.

Reaching our side, Old Dan tore out after her. He was a mad hound. His deep voice was telling her he was coming.

We were trotting along, following my dogs, when I heard Little Ann's bawling stop.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I think she has treed him. Let's give her time to circle the tree to make sure he's there."

Old Dan opened up bawling treed. Rubin started on.

"Something's wrong," I said. "I can't hear Little Ann."

Rainie spoke up, "Maybe the ghost coon ate her up."

I glared at him.

Hurrying on, we came to my dogs. Old Dan was bawling at a hole in a large sycamore that had fallen into the river.

At that spot, the bank was a good ten feet above the water level. As the big tree had fallen, the roots had been torn and twisted from the ground. The jagged roots, acting as a drag, had stopped it from falling all the way into the stream. The trunk lay on a steep slant from the top of the bank to the water. Looking down, I could see the broken tangled mass of the top. Debris from floods had caught in the limbs, forming a drift.

Old Dan was trying to dig and gnaw his way into the log. Pulling him from the hole, I held my lantern up and looked down into the dark hollow. I knew that somewhere down below the surface there had to be another hole in the trunk, as water had filled the hollow to the river level.

Rubin, looking over my shoulder, said, "That coon couldn't be in there. If he was, he'd be drowned."

I agreed.

Rainie spoke up. "You ready to pay off?" he asked. "I told you them hounds couldn't tree the ghost coon."

I told him the show wasn't over.

Little Ann had never bawled treed, and I knew she wouldn't until she knew exactly where the coon was. Working the bank up and down, and not finding the trail, she swam across the river and worked the other side. For a good half-hour she searched that side before she came back across to where Old Dan was. She sniffed around the hollow log.

"We might as well get away from here," Rainie said. "They ain't going to find the ghost coon."

"It sure looks that way," Rubin said.

I told them I wasn't giving up until my dogs did.

"You just want to be stubborn," Rubin said. "I'm ready for my money now."

I asked him to wait a few minutes.

"Ain't no use," he said. "No hound yet ever treed that ghost coon."

Hearing a whine, I turned around. Little Ann had crawled up on the log and was inching her way down the slick trunk toward the water. I held my lantern up so I could see better. Spraddle-legged, claws digging into the bark, she was easing her way down.

"You'd better get her out of there," Rubin said. "If she gets down in that old tree top, she'll drown."

Rubin didn't know my Little Ann.

Once her feet slipped. I saw her hind quarters fall off to one side. She didn't get scared. Slowly she eased her legs back up on the log.

I made no reply. I just watched and waited.

Little Ann eased herself into the water. Swimming to the drift, she started sniffing around. In places it was thin and her legs would break through. Climbing, clawing, and swimming, she searched the drift over, looking for the lost trail.

I saw when she stopped searching. With her body half in the water, and her front feet curved over a piece of driftwood, she turned her head and looked toward the shore. I could see her head twisting from side to side. I could tell by her actions that she had gotten the scent. With a low whine, she started back.

I told Rubin, "I think she smells something."

Slowly and carefully she worked her way through the tangled mass. I lost sight of her when she came close to the undermined bank. She wormed her way under the overhang. I could hear her clawing and wallowing around, and then all hell broke loose. Out from under the bank came the biggest coon I had ever seen, the ghost coon.

He came out right over Little Ann. She caught him in the old treetop. I knew she was no match for

him in that tangled mass of limbs and logs. He fought his way free and swam for the opposite bank. She was right behind him.

Old Dan didn't wait, look, or listen. He piled off the ten-foot bank and disappeared from sight. I looked for him. I knew he was tangled in the debris under the surface. I started to take off my overalls, but stopped when I saw his red head shoot up out of the water. Bawling and clawing his way free of the limbs and logs, he was on his way.

On reaching midstream, the ghost coon headed downriver with Little Ann still on his tail.

We ran down the riverbank. I could see my dogs clearly in the moonlight. The ghost coon was about fifteen feet ahead of Little Ann. About twenty-five yards behind them came Old Dan, trying so hard to catch up. I whooped to them.

Rubin grabbed a pole, saying, "He may come out on this side."

Knowing the ghost coon was desperate, I wondered what he would do. Reaching a gravel bar below the high bank, we ran out on it to the water's edge. Then the ghost coon did something that I never expected. Coming even with us, he turned from midstream and came straight for us.

I heard Rubin yell, "Here he comes!"

He churned his way through the shallows and ran right between us. Rubin swung his pole, missed the coon, and almost hit Little Ann. The coon headed for the river bottoms with her right on his heels.

The bawling of Little Ann and our screaming and hollering made so much noise, I didn't hear Old Dan coming. He tore out of the river, plowed into me, and knocked me down.

We ran through the bottoms, following my dogs. I thought the ghost coon was going back to the sycamore log but he didn't. He ran upriver.

While hurrying after them, I looked over at Rainie. For once in his life, I think he was excited. He

was whooping and screaming, and falling over logs and limbs.

I felt good all over.

Glancing over at me, Rainie said, "They ain't got him yet."

The ghost coon crossed the river time after time. Seeing that he couldn't shake Old Dan and Little Ann from his trail, he cut through the river bottoms and ran out into an old field.

At this maneuver, Rubin said to Rainie, "He's heading for that tree."

"What tree?" I asked.

"You'll see," Rainie said. "When he gets tired, he always heads for that tree. That's where he gets his name, the ghost coon. He just disappears."

"If he disappears, my dogs will disappear with him," I said.

Rainie laughed.

I had to admit one thing. The Pritchard boys knew the habits of the ghost coon. I knew he couldn't run all night. He had already far surpassed any coon I had ever chased.

"They're just about there," Rubin said.

Just then I heard Old Dan bark treed. I waited for Little Ann's voice. I didn't hear her. I wondered what it could be this time.

"He's there all right," Rubin said. "He's in that tree."

"Well, come on," I said. "I want to see that tree."

"You might as well get your money out," Rainie said.

I told him he had said that once before, back on the riverbank.

XIII

COMING UP TO THE TREE, I COULD SEE IT WAS A HUGE BUR oak. It wasn't tall. It was just the opposite, rather low and squatty. The top was a thick mass of large limbs, and it hadn't shed all of its leaves yet.

It stood by itself in an old field. There were no other trees within fifty yards of it. About fifteen feet to the left were the remains of a barbed-wire fence. An old gate hung by one rusty hinge from a large corner post. I could tell that at one time a house had stood close by.

Rubin saw me looking around. "A long time ago some Indians lived here and farmed these fields," he said.

I walked around the tree looking for the coon, but could see very little in the dark shadows.

"Ain't no use to look," Rubin said. "He won't be there."

Rainie spoke up. "This ain't the first time we've been to this tree," he said.

Rubin told Rainie to shut up. "You talk too much," he said.

In a whining voice, Rainie said, "Rubin, you

know the coon ain't in that tree. Make him pay off and let's go home. I'm getting tired."

I told Rubin I was going to climb the tree.

"Go ahead," he said. "It won't do you any good."

The tree was easy to climb. I looked all over it, on each limb, and in every dark place. I looked for a hollow. The ghost coon wasn't there. I climbed back down, scolded Old Dan to stop his loud bawling, and looked for Little Ann.

I saw her far up the old fence row, sniffing and running here and there. I knew the ghost coon had pulled a real trick, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Little Ann had never yet barked treed. I knew if the coon was in the tree she wouldn't still be searching for a trail.

Old Dan started working again.

My dogs covered the field. They circled and circled. They ran up and down the barbed-wire fence on both sides.

I knew the coon hadn't walked the barbed wire. Ghost or no ghost, he couldn't do that. I walked over to the old gate and looked around. I sat down and stared up into the tree. Little Ann came to me.

Old Dan, giving up his search, came back to the tree and bawled a couple of times. I scolded him again.

Rubin came over. Leering at me, he said, "You give up?"

I didn't answer.

Little Ann once again started searching for the lost trail. Old Dan went to help her.

Rainie said, "I told you that you couldn't tree the ghost coon. Why don't you pay off so we can go home?"

I told him I hadn't given up. My dogs were still hunting. When they gave up, I would, too.

Rubin said, "Well, we're not going to stay here all night."

Looking back to the tree, I thought perhaps I had

overlooked something. I told Rubin I was going to climb it again.

He laughed, "Go ahead. Won't do any good. You climbed it once. Ain't you satisfied?"

"No, I'm not satisfied," I said. "I just don't believe in ghost coons."

Rubin said, "I don't believe in ghosts either, but facts are facts. To tell you the truth, I've climbed that tree a dozen times and there just ain't no place in it for a coon to hide."

Rainie spoke up. "Our old blue hound has treed the ghost coon in this tree more times than one. Maybe you two don't believe in ghosts, but I do. Why don't you pay off so we can get away from here?"

"I'll climb it one more time," I said. "If I can't find him, I'll pay off."

Climbing up again, I searched and searched. When I got through, I knew the ghost coon wasn't in that tree. When I came down, I saw my dogs had given up. That took the last resistance out of me. I knew if they couldn't find the ghost coon, I couldn't.

Digging the two one-dollar bills out of my pocket, I walked over to Rubin. Little Ann was by my side. I handed my money over, saying, "Well, you won it fair and square."

With a grin on his face, Rubin took my money. He said, "I bet this will break your old grandpa's heart."

I didn't reply.

Reaching down, I caught Little Ann's head in my hands. Looking into her warm friendly eyes, I said, "It's all right, little girl, we haven't given up yet. We'll come back. We may never catch the ghost coon, but we'll run him until he leaves the country."

She licked my hands and whined.

A small breeze began to stir. Glancing up into the tree, I saw some leaves shaking. I said to Rubin, "Looks like the wind is coming up. It may blow up a storm. We'd better be heading for home."

Just as I turned, I saw Little Ann throw up her

head and whine. Her body grew stiff and taut. I watched her. She was testing the wind. I knew she had scented something in the breeze. Stiff-legged, head high in the air, she started walking toward the tree. Almost there, she turned back and stopped. I knew she had caught the scent but could only catch it when a breeze came.

Looking at Rubin, I said, "I haven't lost that two dollars yet."

Another breeze drifted out of the river bottoms. Little Ann caught the scent again. Slowly she walked straight to the large gatepost, reared up on it with her front feet, and bawled the most beautiful tree bark I ever heard in my life.

Old Dan, not understanding why Little Ann was bawling, stood and looked. He walked over to the post, reared up on it, and sniffed. Then, raising his head, he shook the dead leaves in the bur oak tree with his deep voice.

I looked at Rainie. Laughing, I said, "There's your ghost coon. Now what do you think of my dogs?"

For once he made no reply.

Going over to the post, I saw it was a large black locust put there many years ago to hang the gate. Looking up at the tree, I saw how the ghost coon had pulled his trick. One large long limb ran out and hung directly over the gate. It was a drop of a good twelve feet from the branch to the top of the gatepost, but I knew we weren't after an ordinary coon. This was the ghost coon.

I said to Rubin, "Boost me up and I'll see if the post is hollow."

After breaking off a long Jimson weed to use as a prod, I got up on Rubin's shoulder, and he raised me up. The post was hollow. Not knowing how far down the hole went, I started the switch down. About halfway, I felt something soft. I gave it a hard jab.

I heard him coming. He boiled out right in my face. I let go of everything. Hitting the ground, I rolled over on my back and looked up.

For a split second, the ghost coon stayed on top of the post, and then he jumped. My dogs were on him the instant he hit the ground. The fight was on.

I knew the coon didn't have a chance as he wasn't in the waters of the river. He didn't give up easily even though he was on dry land. He was fighting for his life and a good account he gave. He fought his way to freedom, and made it back to the bur oak tree. He was a good six feet up the side when Old Dan, leaping high in the air, caught him and pulled him back down.

At the foot of the tree, the fight went on. Again the ghost coon fought his way free. This time he made it and disappeared in the dark shadows of the tree. Old Dan was furious. Never before had I seen a coon get away from him.

I told Rubin I would climb up and run him out. As I started climbing, I saw Little Ann go to one side and Old Dan to the other. My dogs would never stay together when they had treed a coon, so that any way he left a tree, he was met by one of them.

About halfway up, far out on a limb, I found the ghost coon. As I started toward him, my dogs stopped bawling. I heard something I had heard many times. The sound was like the cry of a small baby. It was the cry of a ringtail coon when he knows it is the end of the trail. I never liked to hear this cry, but it was all in the game, the hunter and the hunted.

As I sat there on the limb, looking at the old fellow, he cried again. Something came over me. I didn't want to kill him.

I hollered down and told Rubin I didn't want to kill the ghost coon.

He hollered back, "Are you crazy?"

I told him I wasn't crazy. I just didn't want to kill him.

I climbed down.

Rubin was mad. He said, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," I told him. "I just don't have the heart to kill the coon."

I told him there were plenty more; why kill him? He had lived here a long time, and more than one hunter had listened to the voices of his hounds bawling on his trail.

Rainie said, "He's chicken-livered, that's what it is."

I didn't like that but, not wanting to argue, I didn't say anything.

Rubin said, "I'll go up and run him out."

"I won't let my dogs kill him," I said.

Rubin glared at me. "I'm going up and run that coon out," he said. "If you stop your dogs, I'm going to beat you half to death."

"Do it anyway, Rubin," Rainie said.

"I've a good mind to," said Rubin.

Just as Rubin started to climb the tree, Old Dan growled. He was staring into the darkness. Something was coming.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rubin said. "Don't sound like anything I ever heard."

"It's ghosts," Rainie said. "Let's get away from here."

An animal was coming out of the darkness. It was walking slowly in an odd way, as if it were walking sideways. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight out.

As the animal came closer, Rainie said, "Why, it's Old Blue. How did he get loose?"

It was a big blue tick hound. Around his neck was a piece of rope about three feet long. One could see that the rope had been gnawed in two. The frayed end had become entangled in a fair-sized dead limb. Dragging the limb was what made the dog look so odd. I felt much better when I found out what it was.

The blue tick hound was like the Pritchards, mean and ugly. He was a big dog, tall and heavy. His chest was thick and solid. He came up growling. The

hair on his back was standing straight up. He walked stiff-legged around Old Dan, showing his teeth.

I told Rainie he had better get hold of his dog, or there was sure to be a fight.

"You better get hold of your dog," he said. "I'm not worried about Old Blue. He can take care of himself."

I said no more.

"Don't make no difference now whether you kill the ghost coon or not," Rubin said. "Old Blue will take care of him."

I knew the killing of the coon was out of my control, but I didn't want to see him die. I said to Rubin, "Just give back my two dollars and I'll go home. I can't keep you from killing him, but I don't have to stay and see it."

"Rubin, don't give him the money," Rainie said. "He ain't killed the ghost coon."

"That's right," Rubin said. "You ain't, and I wouldn't let you now, even if you wanted to."

I told them my dogs had treed the ghost coon and that was the bet, to tree the ghost coon.

"No, it wasn't," Rubin said. "You said you would kill him."

"It was no such thing," I said. "I've done all I said I would."

Rubin walked up in front of me. He said, "I ain't going to give you the money. You didn't win it fair. Now what are you going to do about it?"

I looked into his mean eyes. I started to make some reply, but decided against it.

He saw my hesitation, and said, "You better get your dogs and get out of here before you get whipped."

In a loud voice, Rainie said, "Bloody his nose, Rubin."

I was scared. I couldn't whip Rubin. He was too big for me. I started to turn and leave when I thought of what my grandfather had told them.

"You had better remember what my grandpa

said," I reminded them. "He'll do just what he said he would."

Rubin didn't hit me. He just grabbed me and with his brute strength threw me down on the ground. He had me on my back with my arms outspread. He had a knee on each arm. I made no effort to fight back. I was scared.

"If you say one word to your grandpa about this," Rubin said, "I'll catch you hunting some night and take my knife to you."

Looking up into his ugly face, I knew he would do just what he said. I told him to let me up and I would go and not say anything to anyone.

"Don't let him up, Rubin," Rainie said. "Beat the hell out of him, or hold him and let me do it."

Just then I heard growling, and a commotion off to one side. The blue hound had finally gotten a fight out of Old Dan. Turning my head sideways, I could see them standing on their hind legs, tearing and slashing at each other. The weight of the big hound pushed Old Dan over.

I told Rubin to let me up so we could stop the fight.

He laughed, "While my dog is whipping yours, I think I'll just work you over a little." So saying, he jerked my cap off, and started whipping me in the face with it.

I heard Rainie yell, "Rubin, they're killing Old Blue."

Rubin jumped up off me.

I clambered up and looked over to the fight. What I saw thrilled me. Faithful Little Ann, bitch though she was, had gone to the assistance of Old Dan.

I knew my dogs were very close to each other. Everything they did was done as a combination, but I never expected this. It is a very rare occasion for a bitch dog to fight another dog, but fight she did.

I could see that Little Ann's jaws were glued to

the throat of the big hound. She would never loosen that deadly hold until the last breath of life was gone.

Old Dan was tearing and slashing at the soft belly. I knew the destruction his long sharp teeth were causing.

Again Rainie yelled, "Rubin, they're killing him. They're killing Old Blue. Do something quick."

Rubin darted over to one side, grabbed my ax from the ground, and said in a loud voice, "I'll kill them damn hounds."

At the thought of what he was going to do with the ax, I screamed and ran for my dogs. Rubin was about ten feet ahead of me, bent over, running with the ax held out in front of him. I knew I could never get to them in time.

I was screaming, "No, Rubin, no!"

I saw the small stick when it whipped up from the ground. As if it were alive, it caught between Rubin's legs. I saw him fall. I ran on by.

Reaching the dogfight, I saw the big hound was almost gone. He had long since ceased fighting. His body lay stretched full-length on the ground. I grabbed Old Dan's collar and pulled him back. It was different with Little Ann. Pull as I might, she wouldn't let go of the hound's throat. Her jaws were locked.

I turned Old Dan loose and, getting astraddle of Little Ann, I pried her jaws apart with my hands. Old Dan had darted back in. Grabbing his collar again, I pulled them off to one side.

The blue hound lay where he was. I thought perhaps he was already dead, and then I saw him move a little.

Still holding my dogs by their collars, I looked back. I couldn't understand what I saw. Rubin was laying where he had fallen. His back was toward me, and his body was bent in a "U" shape. Rainie was standing on the other side of him, staring down.

I hollered and asked Rainie, "What's the matter?"

He didn't answer. He just stood as though in a trance, staring down at Rubin.

I hollered again. He still didn't answer. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't turn my dogs loose. They would go for the hound again.

Again I hollered at Rainie, asking him to come and help me. He neither moved nor answered. I had to do something.

Looking around, my glance fell on the old barbed-wire fence. I led my dogs to it. Holding onto their collars with one hand, I worked a rusty barbed wire backwards and forwards against a staple until it broke. Running the end of it under their collars, I tied them up. They made two or three lunges toward the hound, but the wire held.

I walked over and stopped at Rainie's side. I again asked, "What's the matter?"

He said not a word.

I could see that Rainie was paralyzed with fright. His mouth and eyes were opened wide, and his face was as white as chalk. I laid my hand on his shoulder. At the touch of my hand, he jumped and screamed. Still screaming, he turned and started running. I watched him until he disappeared in the darkness.

Looking down at Rubin, I saw what had paralyzed Rainie. When Rubin had tripped, he had fallen on the ax. As it entered his stomach, the sharp blade had sunk to the eye of the double-bitted ax.

Turning my back to the horrible sight, I closed my eyes. The muscles in my stomach knotted and jerked. A nauseating sickness spread over my body. I couldn't look at him.

I heard Rubin whisper. Turning around, I knelt down by his side with my back to the ax. I couldn't understand what he was whispering. Kneeling down closer, I heard and understood. In a faint voice, he said, "Take it out of me."

I hesitated.

Again he pleaded, "Please, take it out of me."

Turning around, I saw his hands were curled around the protruding blade as if he himself had tried to pull it from his stomach.

How I did it, I'll never know. Putting my hands over his and pressing down, I pulled the ax from the wound. The blood gushed. I felt the warm heat as it spread over my hands. Again the sickness came over me. I stumbled to my feet and stepped back a few paces.

Seeing a movement from Rubin, I thought he was going to get up. With his hands, he pushed himself halfway up. His eyes were wide open, staring straight at me. Stopping in his effort of getting up, still staring at me, his mouth opened as if to say something. Words never came. Instead, a large red bubble slowly worked its way out of his mouth and burst. He fell back to the ground. I knew he was dead.

Scared, not knowing what to do, I called for Rainie. I got no answer. I called his name again and again. I could get no reply. My voice echoed in the darkness of the silent night. A cold chill ran over my body.

I suppose it is natural at a time like that for a boy to think of his mother. I thought of mine. I wanted to get home.

Going over to my dogs, I glanced to where the blue hound was. He was trying to get up. I was glad he wasn't dead.

Picking up my lantern, I thought of my ax. I left it. I didn't care if I never saw it again.

Knowing I couldn't turn my dogs loose, I broke off enough of the wire to lead them. As I passed under the branches of the bur oak tree, I looked up into the dark foliage. I could see the bright eyes of the ghost coon. Everything that had happened on this terrible night was because of his very existence, but it wasn't his fault.

I also knew he was a silent witness to the horrible scene. Behind me lay the still body of a young boy. On my left a blue tick hound lay torn and bleeding. Even after all that had happened, I could feel no hatred for the ghost coon and was not sorry I had let him live.

Arriving home, I awakened my mother and father. Starting at my grandfather's mill, I told everything that had happened. I left nothing out. My mother had started crying long before I had completed my story. Papa said nothing, just sat and listened. When I had finished, he kept staring down at the floor in deep thought. I could hear the sobbing of my mother in the silence. I walked over to her. She put her arms around me and said, "My poor little boy."

Getting to his feet, Papa reached for his coat and hat. Mama asked him where he was going.

"Well, I'll have to go up there," he said. "I'm going to get Grandpa, for he is the only man in the country that has authority to move the body."

Looking at me, he said, "You go across the river and get Old Man Lowery, and you may as well go on up and tell the Bufords, too. Tell them to meet us at your grandfather's place."

I hurried to carry the sad message.

The following day was a nasty one. A slow, cold drizzle had set in. Feeling trapped indoors, I prowled from room to room. I couldn't understand why my father hadn't come back from the Pritchards'. I sat by the window and watched the road.

Understanding my feelings, Mama said, "Billy, I wouldn't worry. He'll be back before long. It takes time for things like that."

"I know," I said, "but you would think he would've been back by now."

Time dragged slowly by. Late in the afternoon, I saw Papa coming. Our old mule was jogging along. Water was shooting out from under his feet in small squirts at every step.

Papa had tied the halter rope around the mule's neck. He was sitting humped over, with his hands jammed deep in the pockets of his patched and worn mackinaw. I felt sorry for him. He was soaking wet, tired, sleepy, and hungry.

Telling Mama, "Here he is," I grabbed my jumper and cap, and ran out to the gate and waited.

I was going to ask him what had happened at the Pritchards' but on seeing his tired face and wet clothes, I said, "Papa, you had better go in to the fire. I'll take care of the mule, and do the feeding and milking."

"That would be fine," he said.

After doing the chores, I hurried to the house. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to find out what had happened.

Walking into the front room, I saw my father had changed clothes. He was standing in front of the fireplace, drinking coffee.

"Boy, that's bad weather, isn't it?" he said.

I said it was, and asked him about Rubin.

"We went to the old tree and got Rubin's body," Papa said. "We were on our way back to the Pritchards' when we met them. They were just this side of their place. They had started to look for him. Rainie had been so dazed when he got home, they couldn't make out what he was trying to tell them, but they knew it must have been something bad. They wanted to know what had happened. I did my best to explain the accident. It hit Old Man Pritchard pretty hard. I felt sorry for him."

Mama asked how Mrs. Pritchard was taking it.

Papa said he didn't know as he never did get to see any of the womenfolks. He said they were the funniest bunch he had ever seen. He couldn't understand them. There wasn't one tear shed that he could see. All of the men had stayed out at the barn. They never had been invited in for a cup of coffee or anything.

Mama asked when they were to have the funeral.

"They have their own graveyard right there on the place," Papa said. "Old Man Pritchard said they would take care of everything, and didn't want to bother people. He said it was too far for anyone to come, and it was bad weather, too."

Mama said she couldn't help feeling sorry for Mrs. Pritchard, and wished they were more friendly.

I asked Papa about Rainie.

Papa said, "According to what Old Man Pritchard said, Rainie just couldn't seem to get over the shock. They were figuring on taking him into town to see the doctor."

In a stern voice, Papa said, "Billy, I don't want you fooling around with the Pritchards any more. You have plenty of country around here so you don't have to go there to hunt."

I said I wouldn't.

I felt bad about the death of Rubin. I didn't feel like hunting and kept having bad dreams. I couldn't forget the way he had looked at me just before he died. I moped and wandered around in a daze. I wanted to do something but didn't know what it was.

I explained my feelings to my mother. She said, "Billy, I feel the same way and would like to do something to help, but I guess there's nothing we can do. There are people like the Pritchards all through the hills. They live in little worlds of their own and are all alone. They don't like to have outsiders interfere."

I told my mother I had been thinking about how dangerous it was to carry an ax while hunting, and I had decided I'd save a few coon hides and get a good gun. Boy, I just shouldn't have mentioned getting a gun. My mother got "sitting-hen" mad.

"You're not getting a gun," she said. "I won't have that at all. I told you a long time ago you could have one when you are twenty-one years old, and I mean just that. I worry enough with you out there in the hills all hours of the night, running and jumping, but I couldn't stand it if I knew you had a gun with you. No, sir. You can just forget about a gun."

"Yes, Mama," I said, and sulked off to my room.

Lying on my bed, still trying to figure out what I could do to help, I glanced over to the wall. There, tied in a small bundle, was just what I needed.

Some time back my sisters had made some flow-

ers for Decoration Day. They had given me a small bouquet for my room. Taking them down, I could see they had faded a little, and looked rather old, but they were still pretty. I blew the dust off and straightened the crinkled petals. Putting them inside my shirt, I left the house.

I hadn't gone far when I heard something behind me. It was my dogs. I tried to tell them I wasn't going hunting. I just had a little business to attend to, and if they would go back, I'd take them out that night. It was no use. They couldn't understand.

Circling around through the flats, I came to the hollow above the Pritchards' place. Down below me, I could see the graveyard, and the fresh mound of dirt. As quietly as I could, I started easing myself down the mountainside.

Old Dan loosened a rock. The further it bounced, the louder it got. It slammed up against a post oak tree and sounded like a gunshot. I held my breath and watched the house. No one came out.

I glared at Old Dan. He wagged his tail, and just to show off, he sat down on his rear and started digging at a flea with his hind leg. The way his leg was thumping in the leaves, anyone could have heard it for a mile. I waited until he quit thumping before starting on.

Reaching the bottom, I had about twenty yards of clearing to cross, but the grass and bushes were pretty thick. Laying down on my stomach, with my heart beating like a trip hammer, I wiggled my way to Rubin's grave. I laid the flowers on the fresh mound of earth, and then turned around and scooted for the timber.

Just as we reached the mountaintop, my foot slipped and I kicked loose a large rock. Down the side of the mountain it rolled. This time the blue tick hound heard the noise. He came out from under the house bawling. I heard a door slam and Mrs. Pritchard came out. She stood looking this way and that way.

The hound ran up to the graveyard and started sniffing and bawling. Mrs. Pritchard followed him. Seeing the flowers on Rubin's grave, she picked them up and looked at them. She scolded the hound, and then looked up at the hillside. I knew she couldn't see me because the timber was too thick, but I felt uncomfortable anyway.

Scolding the hound again, she knelt down and arranged the flowers on the grave. Taking one more look at the hillside, she started back. Halfway to the house, I saw her reach down and gather the long cotton skirt in her hand and dab at her eyes.

I felt much better after paying my respects to Rubin. Everything looked brighter, and I didn't have that funny feeling any more.

All the way home my dogs kept running out in front of me. They would stop, turn around, and look at me. I had to smile, for I knew what they wanted. I stopped and petted them a little and told them that as soon as I got home and had my supper, we would go hunting.

XIV

A FEW DAYS LATER, ON HIS WAY BACK FROM THE MILL, ONE of the Hatfield boys stopped at our place. He told me my grandfather wanted to see me. It was unusual for Grandpa to send for me and it had me worried. I figured that he wanted to talk to me about the death of Rubin Pritchard. I always enjoyed talking to my grandpa but I didn't want to talk about Rubin's death. Every time I thought of him, I lived the horrible tragedy all over again.

After a practically sleepless night, the next morning I started for the store. I was walking along deep in thought when Little Ann zipped by me. She was as happy as a young gray squirrel. She wiggled and twisted and once she barked at me. I looked behind me. There was Old Dan trotting along. He stopped when I turned around. Little Ann came up to me. I scolded them and tried to explain that I wasn't going hunting. I was just going up to the store to see what my grandpa wanted. They couldn't, or didn't, want to understand.

I picked up a small stick and slapped my leg with

it. In a deep voice I said, "Now you go home, or I'm going to wear you out."

This hurt their feelings. With their tails between their legs and trotting side by side, they started back. Every little way they would stop and look back at me. It was too much. I couldn't stand it. I began to feel bad all over.

"Well, all right," I said. "Come on, you can go, but, Dan, if there are any dogs around the store, and you get in a fight, I won't take you hunting for a whole year, and I mean that," although I knew I didn't.

They came running, tickled to death. Little Ann took one of her silly spells. She started nipping at the long red tail of Old Dan. Not getting any reaction from him, she jumped over him. She barked at him. He wouldn't even look at her. She ran around in front of him and laid down in the trail, acting like a cat ready to spring. Stiff-legged, he walked up close to her, stopped, and showed his teeth. I laughed out loud. I knew he wouldn't bite her any more than he would bite me. He was just acting tough because he was a boy dog.

After several attempts to get him to play, Little Ann gave up. Together they started sniffing around in the underbrush.

As I walked up in front of the store, Grandpa hollered at me from the barn. I went over to him. Right away he wanted to know all about Rubin's accident. He listened while I told the story over again.

After I had had my say, Grandpa stood looking down at the ground. There was a deep frown on his face, and a hurt look in his eyes. His quietness made me feel uneasy. He finally raised his head and looked at me. What I could see in his friendly old face tore at my heart. It seemed that there were more wrinkles than I had ever seen before. His uncombed, iron-gray hair looked almost white. I noticed that his wrinkled old hand trembled as he rubbed the wire-stiff stubble on his chin.

In a low voice that quivered as he talked, he said, "Billy, I'm sorry about all this. Truly sorry. I can't help but feel that in a way it was my fault."

"No, Grandpa," I said, "it wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. It just happened and no one could help it."

"I know," he said, "but if I hadn't called Rubin's bet, nothing would have happened. I guess when a man gets old he doesn't think straight. I shouldn't have let those boys get under my skin."

"Grandpa," I said, "Rubin and Rainie could get under anybody's skin. You couldn't help that. Why, they get under everyone's skin that gets close to them."

"Yes, I know," he said, "but still I acted like a fool. Billy, I had no idea things were going to turn out like they did, or I wouldn't have called that bet."

Wanting to change the conversation, I said, "Grandpa, we won that bet fair and square, but they took my money anyway."

I saw the fire come back to his eyes. This made me feel better. He was more like the Grandpa I loved.

"That's all right," he said. "We'll just forget the whole thing."

He stepped over and laid his hand on my shoulder. In a solemn voice, he said, "We won't talk about this again. Now, I want you to forget it ever happened because it wasn't your fault. Oh, I know it's hard for a boy to ever completely forget something like that. All through your life you'll think of it now and then, but try not to let it bother you, and don't ever feel guilty about it. It's not good for a young boy to feel that way."

I nodded my head, thinking if people would just stop questioning me about Rubin's death, maybe I could forget.

Grandpa said, "Well, the accident wasn't the only thing I wanted to talk to you about. I've got something else—something I think will help us both forget a lot of things."

The twinkle in Grandpa's eyes reminded me of what my father had said: "Seems like that old man can cook up more deals than anyone in the country."

I didn't care how many deals Grandpa cooked up. He was still the best grandpa in the whole wide world.

"What have you got?" I asked.

"Come over to the store," he said, "and I'll show you."

On our way over, I heard him mutter, "I hope this doesn't turn out like the ghost-coon hunt."

On entering the store, Grandpa walked to the post office department, and came back with a newspaper in his hand. He spread it out on the counter.

Pointing with his finger, he said in a loud voice, "Look, there!"

I looked. The large black letters read: CHAMPIONSHIP COON HUNT TO BE HELD. My eyes popped open. Again I read the words.

Grandpa was chuckling.

I said, "Boy, if that isn't something. A championship coon hunt." Wide-eyed, I asked, "Where are they having this hunt, and what does it have to do with us?"

Grandpa was getting excited. Off came his glasses and out came the old red handkerchief. He blew his breath on the lens and polished them. He snorted a time or two, reared back, and almost shouted, "Do with us? Why it has everything to do with us. All my life I've wanted to go to one of these big coon hunts. Why I've even dreamed about it. And now the opportunity has come. Yes, sir, now I can go." He paused. "That is, if it's all right with you."

I was dumbfounded. I said, "All right with me? Why, Grandpa, you know it's all right with me, but what have I got to do with it?"

Grandpa was so excited I thought he was going to burst a blood vessel.

Talking excitedly, he said, "I've got it all fixed,

Billy. We can enter Old Dan and Little Ann in this championship hunt."

I was so surprised at what Grandpa had said I couldn't utter a word. At first I was scared and then a wonderful feeling came over me. I felt the excitement of the big hunt as it burned its way into my body. I started breathing like I had been running for a hundred miles. After several attempts, I croaked, "Can just any dog be in this hunt?"

Grandpa almost jumped as he answered, "No, sir, not just any hound can be entered. They have to be the best, and they have to be registered, too."

He started talking with his hands. Pointing to a chair, he said, "Sit down and I'll tell you all about it."

Grandpa calmed down a little and started talking in a serious voice. "Billy," he said, "it takes some doing to have a set of dogs entered in this hunt. I've been working on this for months. I've written letters on top of letters. I've even had several good friends in town helping me. You see, I've kept a record of all the coons your dogs have caught, and believe me, their catch is up there with the best of them. Now, I have already paid the entry fee and everything is fixed. All we have to do is go."

"Entry fee? How much did it cost?" I asked.

"You let me worry about that," he said. "Now what do you say? Want to give it a whirl? I understand the winner receives a gold cup, and you never can tell, we might come home with it. We have as good a chance as anyone else."

Grandpa had me so worked up by this time, I didn't think anyone else had any good hounds but me.

I reared back and blurted, "It's all right with me, Grandpa. Just tell me what to do."

Grandpa flew out of gear like a Model-T Ford. He slapped the counter with his hand. In a pent-up voice, he said, "That's the boy! That's the way I like to hear a coon hunter talk."

With a questioning look on his face, he asked, "Didn't I see your dogs with you when you came up?"

"Yes, they followed me," I said. "They're outside."

"Well, call them in," he said. "I've got something for them."

I called to them. Little Ann came in the store, walking like she was scared. Old Dan came to the door and stopped. I tried to coax him in. It was no use. My dogs, never being allowed in the house, were scared to come in.

Grandpa walked over to a hoop of cheese and cut off two chunks about the size of my fist. He walked to the door, talking to Old Dan. "What's the matter, boy?" he said. "You scared to come in? Well, that shows you're a good dog."

He handed him a piece of the cheese. I heard it rattle in his throat as he gulped it down.

Grandpa came back and set Little Ann up on the counter. He chuckled as he broke the cheese up in small pieces and fed her.

"Yes, sir," he said, "I think we have the best darn coon hounds in these Ozark Mountains, and just as sure as shootin', we're going to win that gold cup."

Grandpa didn't have to say that. The way I was feeling, I already had the cup. All I had to do was go and get it.

Finished with his feeding of Little Ann, Grandpa said, "Now, let's see. The hunt starts on the twenty-third. That's about—well, let's see—this is the seventeenth." Counting on his fingers he finally figured it out. "That's six days from now," he said in a jubilant voice.

I nodded my head.

"We can leave here early on the morning of the twenty-second," he said, "and barring accidents, we should make the campground in plenty of time for the grand opening."

I asked how we were going.

"We'll go in my buggy," he said. "I'll load the tent and everything the night before."

I asked him what he wanted me to bring.

"Nothing," he said, "but these two little hounds, and you be here early; and I believe I'd let these dogs rest, 'cause we want them in tiptop shape when we get there."

I saw the thinking wrinkles bunch up on Grandpa's forehead.

"You reckon your daddy would like to go?" he asked. "As late in the fall as it is, I don't think he's too busy, is he?"

"No, our crops are all gathered," I said. "We've been clearing some of the bottom land, but that's almost done now."

"Well, ask him," he said. "Tell him I'd like to have him go."

"I'll ask him," I said, "but you know how Papa is. The farm comes first with him."

"I know," Grandpa said, "but you ask him anyway, and tell him what I said. Now it's getting late and you had better be heading for home."

I was almost to the door when Grandpa said, "Wait a minute."

He walked over behind the candy counter and shook out one of the quarter sacks. He filled it up to the brim, bounced it on the counter a few times, and dropped in a few more gumdrops.

With a twinkle in his eye, and a smile on his face, he handed it to me saying, "Save some for your sisters."

I was so choked up I couldn't say anything. I took it and flew out the door, calling to my dogs.

On my way home I didn't walk on the ground. I was way up in the clouds just skipping along. With a song, I told the sycamore trees and the popeyed gray squirrels how happy I was.

Little Ann sensed my happiness. She pranced along on the trail. With a doggish grin on her face, she begged for a piece of candy, which I so gladly gave.

Even Old Dan felt the pleasant atmosphere. His long red tail fanned the air. Once he raised his head and bawled. I stood still and listened to the droning

tones of his deep voice. The sound seemed to be trapped for an instant in the thick timber. It rolled around under the tall white sycamores, beat its way through the wild cane, and found freedom out over the clear blue waters of the river. The sound, following the river's course, rolled like the beat of a jungle drum.

As the echo died away in the distance, silence settled over the bottoms. The gray squirrels stopped their chattering. The wild birds quit their singing. I stood still. No sound could be heard. It seemed that all the creatures of the wild were holding their breath. I gazed up to the towering heights of the tall trees. No leaf was stirring. The silence seemed strained and expectant, like a young boy waiting for a firecracker to explode.

I looked at Old Dan. He was standing perfectly still, with his right front foot raised and his long ears fanned open. He seemed to be listening, and challenging any living creature to make a noise.

The silence was broken by the "Whee-e-e-e" of a red-tailed hawk. This seemed to be a signal. All around me the happy atmosphere resumed its natural state.

I heard the "Bam, bam, bam" of a woodpecker high in the top of a box elder snag. The cry of a kingfisher and the scream of a bluejay blended perfectly with the drumlike beat. A barking red squirrel, glued to the side of a hackberry tree, kept time to the music with the beat of his tail.

Each noise I heard and each sight I saw was very familiar to me but I never grew tired of listening and watching. They were a God-sent gift and I enjoyed them all.

As I skipped along, it was hard for me to realize all the wonderful things that had happened to me in such a few short years. I had two of the finest little hounds that ever bawled on the trail of a ringtail coon. I had a wonderful mother and father and three little sisters. I had the best grandpa a boy ever had, and to

top it all, I was going on a championship coon hunt. It was no wonder that my heart was bursting with happiness. Wasn't I the luckiest boy in the world?

Everyone was just sitting down to supper when I got home. My sisters quit the table for the candy. I told them to divide it equally. The oldest one asked if I wanted any of it.

"No," I said. "I brought it all for you." Of course, I didn't tell them about the four pieces I had in my pocket.

They thanked me with their clear blue eyes.

I guess it's pretty hard for a young boy to fool his mama. She took one look at me and called me over. She ruffled up my hair, kissed me, and said, "If my little boy's eyes get any bigger they're going to pop right out of his head. Now tell me, what are you so happy about?"

Before I could say anything, Papa chuckled and asked, "What's going on between you and your grandpa? What are you and that old man cooking up now?"

As fast as I could talk I started telling about the big coon hunt. I told how hard Grandpa had been working to have my dogs entered, and how he had already paid my entry fee.

Catching my breath and looking at Papa, I said, "We're going in his buggy and he wants you to go."

I waited in silence for his reply. Papa sat there staring off into space, sipping his coffee and saying nothing. I knew he was thinking.

In the silence I was sure I could hear my heart thumping.

I said, "Papa, please go. We'll have a lot of fun and besides the winner receives a big golden cup."

He scratched his head and said, "Billy, I'd sure like to go, but I don't see how I can with all this work around here."

I was beginning to think that Papa wasn't going to go. Then Mama started talking.

"Work?" she said. "Why, all the work is practi-

cally done. I don't know of one thing you couldn't put off for a few days. Why don't you go? You haven't been anywhere since I don't know when."

"It's not only the work I'm thinking of," Papa said. "It's you and the girls."

"Why, don't worry about the girls and me," Mama said. "We'll be all right. Besides, it'll be several months yet before I need any help."

When Mama said this, it dawned on me. I had been so busy with my coon hunting I hadn't noticed anything unusual. Mama's tummy was all swelled up. She was going to have a baby. I felt guilty for not having noticed. I went over and put my arms around her and kissed her.

Papa spoke up. "It's sure going to be a big hunt," he said. "I heard something about it up at the store one day."

"Grandpa said there would be hunters there from everywhere," I said, "and some of the best coon hounds in the country."

"Do you think you have a chance to win the cup?" Papa asked.

I started to answer him when the little one piped up. "They can't beat Old Dan and Little Ann," she said. "I just bet they can't."

Everyone laughed at her serious remark. I would have kissed her but she had candy, corn bread, and molasses all over her face.

I told Papa I didn't know how good those dogs were, but there was one thing I did know. If they beat mine, they would have to hunt harder than they ever had before.

After I had had my say about the dogs, a silence settled over the dining room. Everyone was looking at Papa and waiting for his answer.

I saw a pleased smile spread over his face. He stood up. "All right, I'll go," he said, "and, by golly, we'll bring that gold cup back, too."

My sisters started clapping their hands and

squealing with delight. A satisfied smile spread over my mother's face.

At that moment I'm sure no boy in the world could have been happier than I. Tears of happiness rolled down my cheeks. Mama wiped them away with her apron.

In the midst of all the excitement, my little sister, saying not a word, climbed down from her chair. No one said anything. We just watched her.

Still clutching a spoon in her small hand, she came around the table and walked up to me. Looking down at the floor, in a bashful voice, she asked, "Can I have the gold cup?"

Putting my finger under her sticky little chin, I tilted her head up. I smiled as I looked into her clear blue eyes. I said, "Honey, if I win it, I'll give it to no one but you."

I had to cross my heart and hope to die several times before she was satisfied.

Back in her chair she gloated over the others. "You just wait and see," she said. "It'll be all mine, nobody's but mine, and I'll put my banty eggs in it."

"Silly, you don't put banty eggs in a gold cup," the oldest one said. "They're just made to look at."

That night I dreamed about gold cups, little red hounds, and coons as big as rain barrels. Once I woke myself up whooping to my dogs.

The next few days were busy ones for me. Knowing that Papa and I would be gone for several days, I did everything I could to make things convenient for Mama. I chopped a large pile of wood and stacked it close to the kitchen door. To make it easy for her to feed our stock, I cut some poles from the hillside and boxed up one of the stalls in the barn. I filled it full of hay so she wouldn't have to climb the ladder to the loft.

Papa laid down the law to my sisters about being good and helping Mama while we were gone.

The day before we were to leave, I was as nervous as a June bug in a henhouse. The day seemed

endless. A few of the miserable hours were spent talking to my dogs. I told them all about the big hunt and how important it was.

"Now if you don't win the golden cup," I said, "I won't be mad because I know you will do your best."

Old Dan wouldn't even look at me, and paid no attention to what I said. He was sulking because I hadn't been taking him hunting. When I talked to Little Ann, it was different. She listened and seemed to understand everything I said.

I dreaded to go to bed that night. I thought sleep would be impossible. I must have been more tired than I thought I was. I fell asleep almost immediately. Old Red, our rooster, woke me at daybreak, crowing his fool head off.

It was a beautiful morning, clear and frosty.

After a good breakfast, we kissed Mama goodbye and started for the store.

I'm sure there were a lot of coon hunters in the Ozarks, but on that morning none could have felt as big and important as I. Walking along by the side of my father, I threw out my chest and tried hard to keep pace with his long strides. He noticed and laughed.

"You'll have to grow a little bit," he said, "before you can take steps that long."

I didn't say anything. I just smiled.

Hearing a noise overhead, I looked up. The gray ones were winging their way southward. I listened to their talking and wondered what they were saying.

Looking to the mountains around us, I saw that the mysterious artist who comes at night had paid us a visit. I wondered how he could paint so many different colors in one night; red, wine, yellow, and rust.

My dogs were trotting along in front of us. I smiled at the way their hind quarters shifted to the right. Little Ann would jump and bounce and try to get Old Dan to play, but the solemn old boy just jogged along, heedless of everything.

"You know," Papa said, "she doesn't even act like a hound. She is bouncing and playing all the time. Why, she acts more like a little pup than a hound."

"Yes, I know," I said. "I've noticed that myself, but you know one thing, Papa, she's the smartest dog I've ever seen. Why, some of the things she does are almost unbelievable."

"Yes, I know," said Papa, "but still it's strange, very strange."

"There's only one thing wrong with her, Papa," I said.

"Yea, what's that?" he asked.

"You won't believe it," I said, "but she's gun-shy."

"Gun-shy? How do you know she's gun-shy?" Papa asked.

"I didn't know for a long time," I said, "until one day when I was hoeing corn down in the field by the old slough. She and Old Dan were digging in a bank after a ground hog. Across the river some fishermen started shooting a gun. It scared Little Ann, and she came running to me, shaking all over."

"Aw," Papa said, "maybe you just thought she was scared."

"No, I didn't, Papa," I said. "It happened again up at the store one day. Grandpa shot a chicken hawk. When the gun went off, it scared her half to death. No, she's gun-shy all right."

"Aw, well," Papa said, "that doesn't mean anything. A lot of dogs are afraid of guns."

"I know," I said, "but you wouldn't think she would be that way. I believe if I had a gun of my own I could break her of being gun-shy."

Papa looked at me. He said, "From what your mother says, you won't be getting a gun for some time yet."

"Yes, I know," I said.

When we reached the store we saw the team was already hitched to the buggy and was standing in front

of the store. Grandpa had loaded the tent and several boxes of groceries.

I had never seen him in such high spirits. He slapped Papa on the back, saying, "I'm sure glad you could go with us. It'll do you good to get out once in a while."

Papa laughed and said, "It looked like I had to go or have everyone in the family mad at me."

Looking in the buggy I saw my ax. I didn't think I ever wanted to see it again, but for some reason it didn't look like I thought it would. There was no blood on it and it looked harmless enough laying there all clean and bright.

Grandpa saw me looking at it. He came over.

"I kept it a few days," he said, "just in case the marshal wanted to ask some questions. Everything seems to be all right now, and we may need a good ax on this hunt."

Grandpa sensed how I felt about the ax. He waited in silence for my answer.

The excitement of the hunt was so strong in me, even the sight of the ax brought back only a fleeting remembrance of Rubin's accident.

I said, "Yes, we will need one. Besides, it's a good one and there's no use in throwing it away."

Grandpa laughed, reached over, and screwed my cap around on my head, saying, "That the boy, that's what I wanted you to say. Now, you better go to the barn and get some hay and make a bed in the buggy box for your dogs."

"Aw, Grandpa," I said, "they can walk. They don't ever get tired; besides, they're used to walking."

"Walk!" Grandpa almost shouted. "They're not going to walk. No, sir, not if I can help it. You want them to be footsore when we get there?"

Papa chuckled and said, "We can't win a gold cup with two sore-footed hounds, can we?"

"Of course not," Grandpa said. "Now, you go and get that hay like I said."

As I turned to go to the barn I couldn't help but

smile. It made me feel good to have my papa and grandpa so concerned about my dogs.

I had taken only a few steps when Grandpa said, "Oh, wait a minute."

I stopped and turned around.

Walking up to me and glancing toward the house as he did, he whispered, "In that empty kraut barrel in the harness room, there's a jug of corn liquor. Cover it up in the hay so your grandma won't see it, and bring it back with you."

With a twinkle in his eye, he said, "You never can tell when we'll need some medicine."

I knew my father wouldn't drink any of the liquor, but if Grandpa wanted to take along a whole barrel, it was all right with me.

Just when I thought we were ready to leave, Grandma came bustling out.

Grandpa got nervous. He whispered and asked, "Did you hide the jug good?"

I nodded my head.

Grandma handed Grandpa a pair of long-handle underwear and a scarf, saying, "I knew you'd forget something."

Grandpa snorted but knew there was no use arguing with her.

She started picking around in the groceries, asking about salt, pepper, and matches.

"Nannie, we've got everything," he said. "You must think I'm a baby and don't know how to pack a grub box."

"A baby," Grandma snorted. "Why, you're worse than a baby. At least they have a little sense. You don't have any at all. An old codger like you out chasing a coon all over the hills."

At her biting remark, I thought Grandpa was going to blow up. He snorted like Daisy, our milk cow, when she had seen a booger.

I crawled up in the buggy box with my dogs and hung my feet out.

Grandma came over and asked me about warm clothes. I told her I had plenty.

She kissed me good-bye and we were on our way.

XV

OVER A DIM ROCKY ROAD, IN A NORTHEASTERLY DIRECTION, our buggy moved on.

I noticed that the road stayed at the edge of the foothills, but always in sight of the river.

About the middle of the afternoon we stopped at a small stream to water the team. Papa asked Grandpa if he intended to go all the way to the campground before stopping.

"No," he said, "I figure to put up for the night when we reach Bluebird Creek. With a good early start in the morning we can make the campgrounds in plenty of time to pitch our tent and set up camp."

Late that evening we reached Bluebird Creek. We didn't set up our tent. With a tarp we made a lean-to and built a large fire out in front of it.

While Grandpa fed and watered the team, Papa and I carried our bedding to the shelter and made down our beds.

Grandpa said, "While we're cooking supper, you see to your dogs. Feed them and fix them a warm bed."

"I figure to cook them some corn-meal mush," I said. "That's what they're used to eating."

"Mush!" Grandpa growled. "They're not going to have mush, not if I can help it."

He walked over to a grocery box, mumbling as he did, "Mush! A hound can't hunt on a bellyful of that stuff."

He came back and handed me two large cans of corned-beef hash, saying, "Here. Reckon they'll eat this."

I wanted to hug my old grandpa's neck. "Sure, Grandpa," I said, "they'll love that."

Opening one of the cans, I dumped it out on a piece of bark in front of Old Dan. He sniffed at it and refused to eat. I laughed, for I knew why. While I was opening the other can, Grandpa came over.

"What's the matter," he asked. "Won't he eat it?"

"Sure, Grandpa," I said, "he'll eat, but not before Little Ann gets her share."

With the second can opened, I fed her on another piece of bark. Both of them started eating at the same time.

With an astonished look on his face, Grandpa exclaimed, "Well, I'll be darned. I never saw anything like that. Why, I never saw a hound that wouldn't eat. Did you train them to do that?"

"No, Grandpa," I said. "They've always been that way. They won't take anything away from each other, and everything they do, they do it as one."

Papa had overheard our conversation. He said, "You think that's strange. You should have seen what I saw one day."

"One of the girls threw two cold biscuits out in the back yard to Old Dan. He stood and looked at them for a bit, then, picking both of them up in his mouth, he trotted around the house. I followed just to see what he was going to do. He walked up in front of the doghouse, laid them down, and growled; not like he was mad. It was a strange kind of a growl. Little Ann came out of the doghouse and each of them ate a

biscuit. Now, I saw this with my own eyes. Believe me, those dogs are close to each other—real close.”

After Papa had stopped talking, silence settled over the camp.

Grandpa stood staring at my dogs. In a slow voice, as if he were picking his words, he said, “You know, I’ve always felt like there was something strange about those dogs. I don’t know just what it is, and I can’t exactly put my finger on it, yet I can feel it. Maybe it’s just my imagination. I don’t rightly know.”

Turning to my father, he said, “Did you ever notice the way they watch this boy? They see every move he makes.”

Papa said, “Yes, I’ve noticed a lot of things they have done. In fact, I could tell you of a few that you would never believe, but right now here’s something you had better believe. Supper is ready.”

While I was helping myself to hot dutch-oven corn bread, fried potatoes, and fresh side meat, Grandpa poured the coffee. Instead of the two cups I expected to see, he set out three and filled them to the brim with the strong black liquid.

I had never been allowed to drink coffee at home and didn’t exactly know what to do. I glanced at Papa. He seemed too busy with his eating to pay any attention to me. Taking the bull by the horns, I reached over and ran my finger through the cup’s handle. I held my breath as I walked over and sat down by a post oak stump. Nothing was said. Grandpa and Papa paid no attention to what I did. My head swelled up as big as a number-four washtub. I thought, “I’m not only big enough to help Papa with the farm. Now I’m big enough to drink coffee.”

With supper over and the dishes washed, Grandpa said, “Well, we had better turn in as I want to get an early start in the morning.”

Long after Grandpa and Papa had fallen asleep, I lay thinking of the big hunt. My thoughts were inter-

rupted when the wonders of night life began to stir in the silence around us.

From a ridge on our right a red fox started barking. He was curious and, in his small way, challenging the intruders that had dared to stop in his wild domain. From far back in the flinty hills, the monotonous call of a hoot owl floated down in the silent night. It was the mating call and was answered from a distant mountain.

I could hear the stamping feet of our horses, and the grinding, crunching noise made by their strong teeth as they ate the hard, yellow kernels of corn in their feed boxes. A night hawk screamed as he winged his way through the starlit night. An eerie screech from a tree close by made shivers run up and down my spine. It was a screech owl.

I didn't like to hear the small owl, for there was a superstition in the mountains concerning them. It was said that if you heard one owl it meant nothing at all, but if you heard more than one, it meant bad luck.

I lay and listened to the eerie twittering sound. It was coming from the left of our camp. The creepy noise stopped, and for several moments there was silence. When next I heard the cry, it was coming from the right. I sat up in alarm. Had I heard two owls?

My movement had awakened Grandpa. In a sleepy voice, he asked, "What's the matter? Can't you sleep? What are you sitting up like that for?"

"Grandpa, I heard two screech owls," I said.

Grunting and mumbling, he sat up. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he said, "You heard two screech owls. Why, that's nothing. I've heard two—oh, I see. You're thinking of the bad-luck superstition. There's nothing to that; nothing at all. Now you lie down and go to sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a big day."

I tried hard to fall asleep, but couldn't. I couldn't get the owls out of my mind. Had I really heard two? Were we going to have bad luck? Surely nothing bad could happen. Not on such a wonderful hunt.

I found peace in my mind by telling myself that

the owl had changed trees. Yes, that was it. He had simply flown out of one tree to another.

The next morning, while having breakfast, Grandpa started kidding me about the screech owls.

"I wish you could have caught one of those owls last night," he said. "We could have boiled him in our coffee pot. I've heard there is nothing like strong hoot-owl coffee."

"It wasn't a hoot owl, Grandpa," I said. "It was a screech owl. I don't know for sure if I heard one or two. It could have been just one." Pointing to a small red oak, I said, "I think the first time I heard him, he was over there. The next time, it was over in that direction. Maybe he changed trees. I sure hope so."

Grandpa saw I was bothered. "You don't believe that hogwash superstition, do you? Bad luck! Baw, there's nothing to it."

Papa laughed, and said, "These mountains are full of that jinx stuff. If a man believed it all, he'd go crazy."

The encouraging words from Papa and Grandpa helped some, but there was still some doubt. It's hard for a young boy to completely forget things like that.

Breakfast over, and our gear stowed back in the buggy, we left Bluebird Creek.

On that day Grandpa drove a little faster than he had on the previous one. I was glad of this, for I was anxious to reach the campground.

About noon he stopped the team. I heard him ask Papa, "Is this Black Fox Hollow?"

"No," Papa said. "This is Waterfall. Black Fox is the next one over. Why?"

"Well," Grandpa said, "there's supposed to be a white flag in the mouth of Black Fox. That's where we leave the road. The camp is in the river bottoms."

By this time I was so excited, I stood up in the buggy box so I could get a better view.

"Maybe you ought to step them up a little, Grandpa," I said. "It's getting pretty late."

Papa joined in with his loud laughter. "You just

take it easy," he said. "We'll get there in plenty of time. Besides, these mares can't fly."

I saw the flag first. "There it is, Grandpa," I shouted.

"Where?" he asked.

"Over there. See, tied on that grapevine."

As we left the main road, I heard Papa say, "Boy, look at all those tracks. Sure has been a lot of traveling on this road."

"That smoke over there must be coming from the camps," Grandpa said.

When we came in sight of the camp, I couldn't believe what I saw. I stared in amazement. I had never seen so many people at one gathering. Tents were spread out over an acre and a half of ground; all colors, shapes, and sizes. There were odd-looking cars, buggies, wagons, and saddle horses.

I heard Grandpa say almost in a whisper, "I knew there would be a lot of people here but I never expected so many."

I saw the astonished look on my father's face.

Off to one side of the camp, under a large black gum tree, we set up our tent. I tied my dogs to the buggy, and fixed a nice bed for them under it. After everything was taken care of, I asked if I could look around the camp.

"Sure," Grandpa said. "Go any place you want to go, only don't get in anyone's way."

I started walking through the large camp. Everyone was friendly. Once I heard a voice say, "That's the boy who owns the two little red hounds. I've heard they're pretty good."

If my head had gotten any bigger, I know it would have burst.

I walked on, as straight as a canebrake cane.

I looked at the hounds. They were tied in pairs here and there. I had seen many coon hounds but none that could equal these. There were redbones, blue ticks, walkers, and blood hounds. I marveled at their beauty. All were spotlessly clean with slick and

glossy coats. I saw the beautiful leather leashes and brass-studded collars.

I thought of my dogs. They were tied with small cotton ropes, and had collars made from old checkline leather.

As I passed from one set of dogs to another, I couldn't help but wonder if I had a chance to win. I knew that in the veins of these hounds flowed the purest of bred blood. No finer coon hounds could be found anywhere. They came from the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, the bayou country of Louisiana, the Red River bottoms of Texas, and the flinty hills of the Ozarks.

Walking back through the camp, I could feel the cold fingers of doubt squeezing my heart. One look at my dogs drove all doubt away. In the eyes of Little Ann it seemed I could read this message: "Don't worry. Just wait. We'll show them."

That night, Grandpa said, "Tomorrow they'll have a contest for the best-looking hound. Which one are you going to enter?"

I told him I didn't think I'd enter either one of my dogs. They were so little. I didn't think they had a chance.

Grandpa got all huffed up. He said, "It doesn't make any difference how little they are. They're coon hounds, aren't they?"

I asked him if he had seen any of the other hounds.

He said, "Yes, I've seen them all. Sure they're big and good dogs, too, but it makes no difference. I don't care if your dogs are no bigger than a snuff can. They still have a chance. Now, which one are you going to enter?"

I couldn't decide. I said, "I'll think it over tonight and let you know tomorrow."

The next morning when I stepped outside the tent I saw men everywhere. They were combing and brushing their dogs, and getting them pruned for the

beauty contest. Beautiful combs and brushes were used to brush expensive oils into their glossy hair.

Going over to my dogs, I stood and looked at them. I started to untie Old Dan but, taking a closer look at him, I could see he could never win a beauty contest. His face and ears were a mass of old scars, caused from the many fights with tough old coons and bobcats. I held his head in my hands and felt sorry for him, but loved him that much more.

I looked Little Ann over and couldn't see any scars. I laughed because I knew why. She was too smart to walk right up in the face of a fight. She would wait until Old Dan took hold and then dart in.

I untied her rope and walked her over to our tent.

My father and grandfather were gone. No doubt they were over in some tent visiting old friends and making new ones.

Looking around to find something I could use to groom my dog, I saw Grandpa's open suitcase. There, right on top, was the very thing I needed, his beautiful bone-handled hairbrush and his ivory comb. Picking them up, I turned them over and over in my hand.

Little Ann stood looking at me. Impulsively I reached down and raked her from shoulder to hip with the brush. She seemed to like it. I knew I shouldn't do it, but I decided to use them.

Knowing I had no oils, I got some butter from our grocery box. With the homemade butter and Grandpa's hair set, I brushed her until she shone. All the time I was grooming her, she tried to lick the butter from my hands.

The job completed, I stepped back and inspected her. I was surprised at the change. Her short red hair glistened and every one was in perfect place.

Shaking my finger at her, I said, "If you lay down and roll, I'll wear you out," although I knew I wouldn't.

Hearing a lot of movement outside, I looked out. Men were setting their dogs on a long table which

had been built in the center of the campground. Leading Little Ann to it, I picked her up and set her on the table, too.

I told her to act like a lady. She wagged her tail as though she understood. I untied the rope and stepped back.

After the dogs were all lined up, the judging started. Four judges walked around and around the table, looking at them from all angles. When one of them would point at a hound, he was taken down and eliminated from the contest. Dog after dog was disqualified. Little Ann was still on the table.

My eyes were wide, my throat dry, and my heart thumping. One judge stopped in front of Little Ann. My heart stopped, too. Reaching over, he patted her on the head.

Turning to me, he asked, "Is this your dog?"

I couldn't speak. I just nodded my head.

He said, "She's a beautiful hound."

He walked on down the line. My heart started beating again.

There were eight dogs left. Little Ann was still holding her own. Then there were four. I was ready to cry. Two more were taken down. Little Ann and a big walker hound owned by a Mr. Kyle were the only ones left. The judges couldn't seem to make up their minds.

Everyone started shouting, "Walk them! Walk them!"

I didn't know what they meant.

Mr. Kyle and I were told to go to one end of the table. Our dogs were placed at the other end. Mr. Kyle snapped his fingers and called to his dog.

The big hound started walking toward his master. What a beautiful sight it was. He walked like a king. His body was stiff and straight, his head high in the air, his large muscles quivered and jerked under his glossy coat, but something went wrong. Just before he reached the end, he broke his stride, turned, and jumped down from the table.

A low murmur ran through the crowd.

It was my turn. Three times I tried to call to Little Ann. Words just wouldn't come out. My throat was too dry. The vocal cords refused to work, but I could snap my fingers. That was all I needed. She started toward me. I held my breath. There was silence all around me.

As graceful as any queen, with her head high in the air, and her long red tail arched in a perfect rainbow, my little dog walked down the table. With her warm gray eyes staring straight at me, on she came. Walking up to me, she laid her head on my shoulder. As I put my arms around her, the crowd exploded.

During the commotion I felt hands slapping me on the back, and heard the word "congratulations" time after time. The head judge came over and made a speech. Handing me a small silver cup, he said, "Congratulations, son. It was justly won."

The tears came rolling. I gathered my dog up in my arms and walked to our tent. Grandpa followed, proudly carrying the cup.

That evening the head judge stepped up on the table. He had a small box in his hand. He shouted, "Over here, men! I have some announcements to make."

We all gathered around.

In a loud voice, he said, "Gentlemen, the contest will start tonight. I'm sure most of you men have been in these hunts before. For those of you who haven't, I will explain the rules. Each night five sets of dogs will be taken out to hunt. A judge will go along with each pair of hounds. Every morning, the judges will turn in that night's catch. The two hounds that tree the most coons will qualify for the championship runoff. The other four sets will be eliminated from the hunt. Of course, if there is a tie, both sets will qualify. On the following nights, only those hounds tying the first night's score, or getting more, will be in the runoff.

"Now, gentlemen, this hunt must be carried out

in a sportsmanlike way. If the coon is treed where he can't be caught, such as in a bluff, it will not be counted. You must catch the coon, skin it, and turn the hide over to your judge.

"You are allowed to take an ax, a lantern, and a gun with bird shot, which you can use to get a coon out of a tree.

"Twenty-five sets of hounds have been entered in the hunt. In this box, I have twenty-five cards. Everyone in the contest will now line up for the drawing. The card you draw will tell you what night your hounds are to hunt."

Walking along in the line, I noticed the beautiful red coats, the caps, and the soft leather boots worn by the other hunters. I felt out of place in my faded blue overalls, old sheepskin coat, and scuffed and worn shoes, but to the wonderful men it made no difference. They treated me like a man, and even talked to me like a man.

When it came my time to draw, my hand was shaking so hard I could hardly get it in the box. Pulling the card out, I saw I had drawn the fourth night.

After the hunters had left, we stood around our campfires sipping strong black coffee and listening to the baying of the hounds. Time after time, we heard the tree bark.

Once two hounds came close to the camp, hot on a trail. We listened to their steady bawling. All at once they stopped.

After several minutes of waiting, a hunter said, "You know what? That old coon took to the river and in some way has fooled those dogs."

Another one said, "Yes, sir, he sure has."

A friendly hunter looked at me and asked, "Do you think he could have fooled your dogs?"

Thinking his question over, I said, "You know, sometimes when I am hunting, away back in the mountains or down on the river, I sing a little song I made up myself. One of the verses goes like this:

You can swim the river, Old Mister Ringtail,
And play your tricks out one by one.
It won't do any good, Old Mister Ringtail,
My Little Ann knows every one.

The hunters roared with laughter. Some slapped me on the back.

Tired and sleepy, but with a smile on my face, I went off to bed.

The next morning two blue tick hounds, from the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, came out in the lead with three big coons to their credit. The other four sets were eliminated.

The following morning all five sets of dogs were eliminated. None had even tied the blue ticks, although two sets had gotten two coons, and one of these had treed a third one in a bluff.

That day, while eating dinner, my grandfather asked me if my dogs had ever treed three coons in one night.

I said, "Yes, four different times, but that's all."

"Where do you think we should hunt on our night?" Papa asked.

I told him if we could get our judge to go with us in the buggy, we would be better off if we could go far downriver and get out of the range where other dogs had hunted.

He said, "That's a good idea. I'll go to see the judges about it."

While I was washing the dishes, Grandpa said, "I think I'll shave."

I should've left the tent then, but I wasn't done with my dish-washing.

With a pin, Grandpa hung a small mirror on the tent wall. After much snorting, mumbling, and screwing of his face this way and that, the job was completed. Dabbing a little water on his iron-gray hair, he reached for his brush and comb.

From the corner of my eye I watched him. I had

tried to clean the beautiful brush but hadn't been able to get all the short red hair from it.

With two fingers, Grandpa pulled some of the hair from the bristles. Holding it in front of him, he looked it over carefully. Then, bending over close to the mirror, peeking over his glasses, he inspected his head. Straightening up, he looked at the brush again. Turning around quickly, he looked straight at me and said, "Say, young—"

Not waiting for anything more, I scooted for the door. Crawling under the buggy, I lay down between my dogs. I knew he wouldn't be mad at me, but it would be best to stay away for a while.

The third night, the blue ticks were tied by two black and tan hounds from the bayou country of Louisiana.

All that day I was restless. I prowled through the camp. Every little while I would go and see how Old Dan and Little Ann were. Once I took two weenies from our groceries. I heated them and gave them to my dogs for a treat. Old Dan swallowed his down in one gulp, and looked at me as if to say, "Is that all?" Little Ann ate hers in a ladylike way. I could have sworn I saw a small grin on her face.

Grandpa was hopping around like a grasshopper, going here and there. Once, passing a tent, I heard his voice. I knew he was bragging about my dogs. I smiled to myself.

Another hunter stopped me and asked, "Is it true that your hounds have treed six coons in one night, three up in one tree, or is that old man just blowing off steam?"

I told him my grandfather had a little steam, but he was the best grandpa a boy ever had.

He patted me on the head, turned, and walked away laughing.