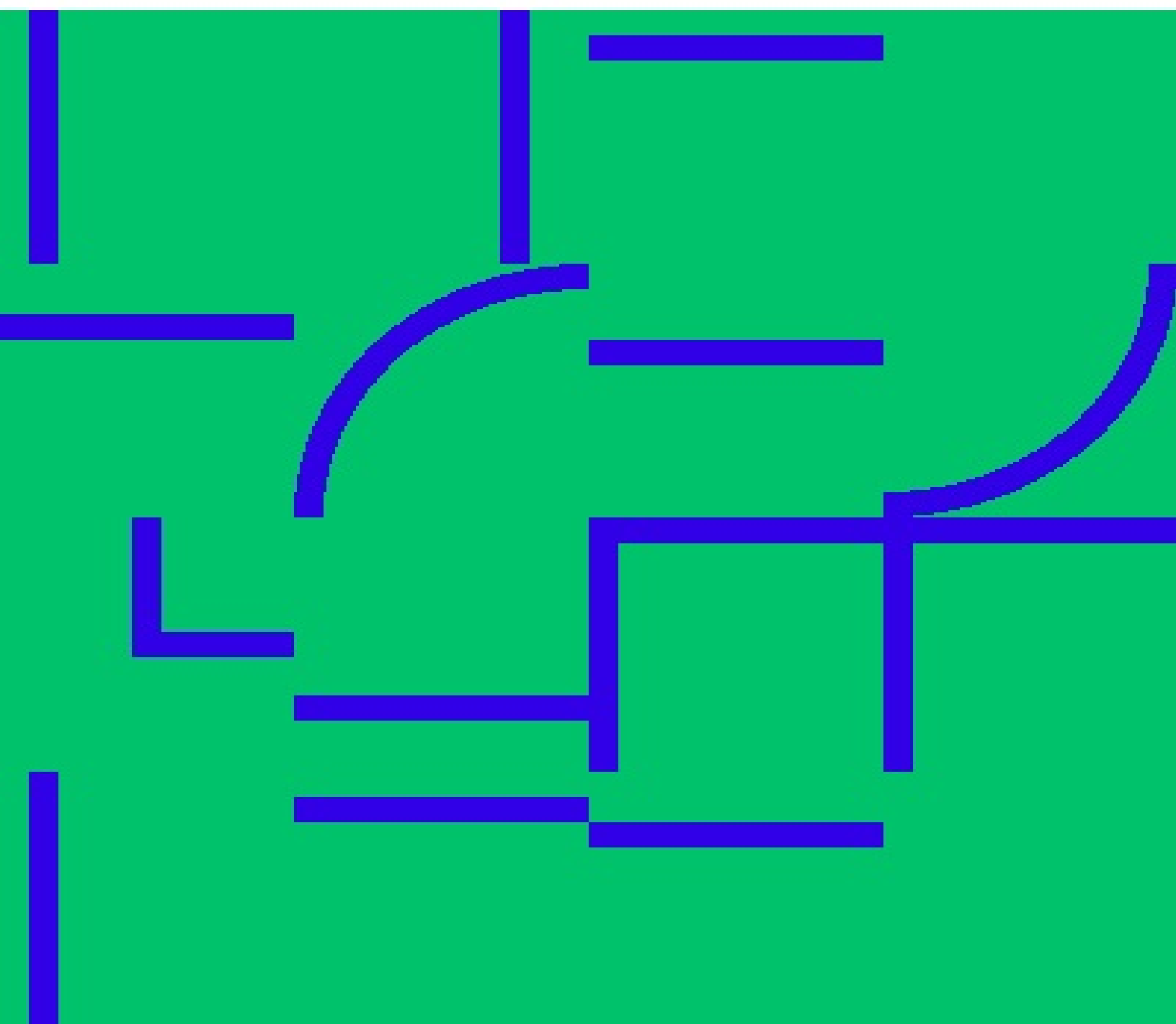


The Duck-footed Hound

Jim Kjelgaard



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THE DUCK-FOOTED HOUND

By Jim Kjelgaard

ILLUSTRATED BY MARC SIMONT

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Old Joe was the biggest, fightingest, craftiest coon in the Creeping Hills. No one had ever been able to catch him; not even Precious Sue, a bluetick hound peerless in tracking down coons.

But Harky felt that this autumn the hunting would be different. Old Joe was in for trouble. Precious Sue had a pup who looked like a natural-born coon hunter. With his web-footed paws he was as skillful in the water as any coon. And on land, Duckfoot had a nose that beat every other hound hollow.

Harky had a few troubles of his own. First there was school. Miss Cathby was nice, but she was a teacher. She called Old Joe a *raccoon*. And she said he could not live forever because he was mortal.

Then there were girls. More specifically, there was Melinda—the bossiest, uppitiest young lady for miles around. And she wanted to *hunt*.

Jim Kjelgaard's story of people and hounds captures all the glory and excitement of coon hunting on a crisp autumn night. Marc Simont has illustrated the story with wit and brilliance.

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THE DUCK-FOOTED HOUND



OLD JOE

At twenty minutes past nine on a Friday night, just after the dark of moon, an owl in the topmost branches of the huge hollow sycamore saw Old Joe come out of his den.

The ancient sycamore's trunk, rooted in gravel beside a brooding slough filled with treacherous sand bars, was five feet in diameter at the base. With only a slight taper, it rose for twenty-five feet to the first crotch. Peering down through leafless twigs and branches, the owl saw the entrance to Old Joe's den as a gaping dark hole squarely in the center of the crotch.

The owl was not aware of the precise second when the hole became filled. It was an unnerving thing, for the owl had long ago learned that it is the part of wisdom to know what comes and to recognize it when it appears, and because he was startled he fluttered his wings.

He recovered almost instantly, but remained tense and alert. A noted raider himself, the owl was the rankest of amateurs compared with the old boar coon whose masked face filled the den's entrance and whose black nose quivered as it tested the night scents.

Old Joe, the biggest, craftiest, fightingest coon in the Creeping Hills, had slept in the hollow sycamore since the frigid blasts of mid-December had draped the hills with snow and locked the ponds and creeks in ice. But it was as impossible for him to remain asleep during this January thaw as it was for the sycamore not to stir its roots and make ready to feed new sap to its budding leaves.

He came all the way out and sat in the crotch. A little more than thirty-six inches long from the end of his tapering nose to the tip of his ringed tail, he stood thirteen inches high at the shoulder and weighed a pound for every inch of length. His fur, shading from light gray to deep black, was lustrous and silky.

The owl saw beneath these external appearances and knew Old Joe for what he was: part burglar, part devil, and part imp.

The owl flew away. He knew his superior when he met him.

Old Joe, who'd seen the owl in the upper branches before that night-faring pirate knew he was coming out, did not even bother to glance up. Owls, the terror of small birds and beasts, merited only contempt from one who'd been born with a knowledge of the pirate's craft and had refined that knowledge to an art. Old Joe would happily rob the owl's nest and eat his mate's eggs when and if he could find them, and if he had nothing more important to do. This night there was much of importance that cried for his attention.

Like all raiders with enemies that plot their downfall, he'd attended to his first duty before he ever showed himself. With only his nose protruding from the den, he'd read the stories the wind carried and found nothing he must hide from, or match wits with, in any part of it. The wind had intensified his excitement and increased the urge that had awakened him and sent him forth.

Last night the wind had purred out of the north, bringing intense cold that made trees crack like cannon shots, but tonight the wind was directly out of the south. The snow blanket sagged, and damp little rivulets, from melting snow that had gathered on the upper branches, crept down the sycamore's trunk. Winter was not broken. But it was breaking, and there would never be a better reason for waking up and faring forth.

Old Joe attended to his second duty. While winter had its way in the Creeping Hills, he had slept snug and warm in the hollow trunk of the old sycamore. His fur was more disheveled than any proper coon should ever permit, and meticulous as any cat, Old Joe set to grooming himself.

The sycamore was anything but a casually chosen den. The men who lived in the Creeping Hills, small farmers for the most part, did so because they preferred the backwoods to anywhere else. For recreation they turned to hunting, and Old Joe had run ahead of too many coon hounds not to understand the whys and wherefores of such.

With a hound on his trail, any coon that did not know exactly what he was doing would shortly end up as a pelt tacked to the side of a barn and roast coon in the oven. Hounds could not climb trees, but the hunters who accompanied the hounds carried lights, guns, and axes. A coon that sought safety in a tree that had no hollow would be "shined" and either shot out or shaken out to be finished by the hounds. Most trees that were hollow were not proof against axes.

The sycamore was perfect. The slough at the bottom, with its shifting sand bars, could be navigated in perfect safety by anything that knew what it was doing. Old Joe did. Most hounds did not. Many that recklessly flung themselves into the slough, when they were hot on Old Joe's trail, had come within a breath of entering that Heaven which awaits all good coon hounds.

Even if a hound made its way to the base of the sycamore, and some had, Old Joe was still safe. Hunters who would enthusiastically fell smaller trees recoiled before this giant. The most skilled axeman would need hours to chop it down. Climbing the massive trunk, unless one were equipped with climbing tools, was impossible.

If anyone tried to climb or chop, and so far no one had, Old Joe had an escape. The west fork above the crotch probed another thirty feet into the air before its branches became too small to support a heavy coon. One solid limb leaned over a high and rocky ledge in which was the entrance to an underground tunnel. This tunnel had two exits, one leading to a tangled mass of brush and the other to a swamp. Old Joe could, as he had proved many times, drop directly from the overhanging limb into the tunnel's entrance.

So far, though most coon hunters of the Creeping Hills knew that Old Joe sometimes climbed the sycamore when he was hard-pressed, none even suspected that he stayed there. From ground level the trunk did not look hollow, and since no one had ever seen fit to climb the tree, none had ever seen the den entrance in the crotch. It was commonly supposed that once Old Joe was in the sycamore he climbed out on one of the branches overhanging the slough and dropped in.

Not all coon hunters believed that. Mellie Garson and a few others whose hounds had been good enough to trail Old Joe to the sycamore swore that once he reached the topmost branches the old coon simply sprouted wings and flew away.

The last hair finally, and perfectly, in place, Old Joe came out of the tree. This he accomplished by utilizing a natural stairway that benign providence seemed to have provided just for him.

Long ago, a bolt of lightning had split the sycamore from crotch to ground level. Over the years, save for a seam where the spreading bark had finally met, the tree had healed itself. The seam was no wider or deeper than the thickness of a man's thumb, but it was enough for Old Joe.

Bracing one handlike forepaw against the side, and bringing the other up behind it, he sought and found a

grip with his rear paws and descended head first. His grip was sure, but he hadn't the slightest fear of falling anyway. Often he had fallen or jumped from greater heights, onto hard ground, without the least injury to himself.

He descended safely, as he had known he would, and when he was near the ground he halted and extended a front paw to touch the thawing snow. Old Joe chattered his pleasure.

Nature, in designing him, seemed to have started with a small bear in mind. Then she decided to incorporate portions of the beaver and otter, and at the last minute included certain characteristics of the monkey plus a few whims of her own. With a bear's rear paws and a monkey's hands, Old Joe was at home in the trees. But he found his life in the water and took a fair portion of his living from it. He had had his last swim in Willow Brook the night before it froze, and that was too long to go without a bath.

Old Joe buried both front paws in the soggy snow, then let go with his rear ones and rolled over and over. He rose with dripping fur and racing blood, not even feeling the cold.

The proper course now would be to smooth his fur by rubbing his whole body against the trunk of the nearest tree, but he was too wise to return to the sycamore. Old Joe had long since learned that he left telltale hairs wherever he rubbed, and coon hairs on a tree are an open book to even a semi-skilled woodsman. Old Joe made a belly dive into a puddle of slush, exulting in the spray that scattered.

He knew also that he was leaving tracks, but he did not care. He had no intention of returning to the sycamore tonight and perhaps not for many nights, and coon tracks meant only that a coon had passed this way. Besides, tracks would disappear when the snow melted. Hair clinging to the sycamore's bark would not.

Old Joe went happily on.

Though he had eaten nothing in almost seven weeks, he was not especially hungry, and hunger alone never would have driven him from the den tree. There was something else: an irresistible urge that he could not have denied if he would. Old Joe was on the most important and compelling of all missions, a mission that had begun when time began and would endure until time ended. On this warm night, he must go out simply because he could not stay.

With little side excursions here and there, but always heading directly into the wind, he traveled almost due south. When a bristled dog fox barred his path, Old Joe did not swerve at all. The fox bared its fangs, snapped its jaws, and at the last second, yielded the right of way.

The Creeping Hills were Joe's beat and would remain his beat. He would go where he pleased, for he feared no other wild creature. Even his distant cousins, the black bears that shared the Creeping Hills with him, had never succeeded in keeping Old Joe from where he wished to venture. The bears were bigger and stronger than he, but they could not climb so fast nor swim so far, and they did not know all the hiding places that Old Joe had discovered before his second birthday.

Old Joe was a match for anything in the Creeping Hills except hunters with guns. Hunters were to be parried with wits rather than force, since force alone could never hope to prevail against firearms. But hunters gave spice to what, at times, might have been a monotonous existence. The chase was usually as welcome to Old Joe as it was to any hounds or hunters that had ever pursued him.

Three-quarters of a mile from the sycamore, Old Joe halted and gravely examined a new scene.

The slough at the base of the sycamore remained frozen. But Willow Brook, with its due proportion of still pools and snarling riffles, had overflowed the ice that covered it and had surged up on both banks. No more than two yards from the tip of Old Joe's nose, three forlorn willow trees seemed to shiver on a high knoll that was ordinarily dry, but that was now a lonely little island besieged by the overflow from Willow Brook.

Quivering with delight, Old Joe rippled forward. He belly-splashed into the water, swam across, and climbed the knoll. He rubbed himself against each of the willows, groaning with the luxury of such a massage. Then he jumped down the other side of the knoll, plunged into the swift water that flowed over Willow Brook's ice, and without yielding an inch to the current emerged on the far bank. There he halted.

The owl that had sat in the top branches of the sycamore and watched Old Joe come out of his den had known that he was part burglar, part devil, and part imp. The owl had not known that, depending on circumstances, Old Joe could be any of these three without regard to the other two. Reaching the far bank, he was all imp.

He knew everything about the Creeping Hills, including the location of each farm, the character of the farmer and his family, the gardens planted and the crops that would grow, and the number and species of livestock.

A sagging barbed-wire fence two yards from the edge of Willow Brook marked the border of the Mundeefarm. Its proprietor was Arthur Mundeef, but because no man in the Creeping Hills was ever called by his given name, his neighbors knew him as Mun. He had a thirteen-year-old son named Harold and called Harky, and a wife who had gone to her eternal peace seven years ago. Next in importance was a hound, a bluetick named Precious Sue. Mun Mundeef was a coon hunter so ardent that hunting coons was almost a passion, and Precious Sue one of the few hounds that had ever tracked Old Joe to the great sycamore. This had not impressed Old Joe unduly, or created any special fear of either Mun Mundeef or Precious Sue.

After a moment's concentration, Old Joe ran his tongue over his lips. Mun Mundeef owned some horses, some cattle, and some pigs. He also owned some chickens. Old Joe had not been hungry when he left the sycamore, but neither had he expected an opportunity to confound Mun Mundeef. Old Joe licked his lips a second time. When he thought of the chickens, he was suddenly ravenous.

He left Willow Brook and crawled under the barbed-wire fence. He did not slink or hesitate, for he had chosen his night well; the waning moon left complete darkness behind it. The Mundeefs would be asleep in their house and Precious Sue on the porch. Nobody hunted coons in winter.

Walking boldly, but with not so much as a whisper of sound on the thawing snow, Old Joe saw as soon as the farm came in sight that his analysis was correct. The house was dark. The Mundeefs and Precious Sue were asleep. Cattle and horses shuffled in their stalls and pigs grunted sleepily in their sty.

Old Joe went straight to the chicken house, and licked his lips a third time as the odor of sleeping chickens delighted his nostrils.

He did not hesitate but went straight to the small door that let the chickens in and out. It was a sliding door that could be raised or lowered, and it was a combination with which Old Joe had long been familiar. He slipped a front paw beneath the door, raised it, entered the chicken house, and let the door slide shut behind him.

The inside of Mun Mundeef's chicken house, like the other chicken houses in the Creeping Hills, was

familiar. Old Joe climbed to the roost, and a fat white hen clucked sleepily as she sensed something alien beside her. Almost gently Old Joe opened his mouth, closed it on the fat hen's neck, and leaped lightly to the floor with his plunder. He let himself out the same way he got in.



He was halfway back to Willow Brook when, stopping to get a better grip on the fat hen, he was careless. The hen was good for one last squawk.

One was enough. Precious Sue, sleeping on the porch, heard and correctly interpreted. A silent trailer, a hound that made no noise until quarry was bayed, she came rushing through the night.

Old Joe did not hurry, for haste was scarcely consistent with his dignity. But he had not left his den to play with a hound, and there was a simple way to be rid of Precious Sue.

Coming to Willow Brook, and still clutching his hen, Old Joe leaped in and surrendered to the water. A half mile downstream he left the brook, stopped to feast leisurely on the fat hen, and made his way to a swamp so dense and thick that even full sunlight never penetrated some parts of it.

Deep in the swamp he came to his destination, a hollow oak, a huge old tree as massive as his sycamore. Unhesitatingly he climbed the hollow, and the female coon that had chosen the oak as her winter den awoke to snarl and bite him on the nose.

Repelled, but by no means resigned, Old Joe found another den in a nearby ledge of rocks and made plans to meet the situation.



HARKY

At twenty minutes past five, just four hours before Old Joe startled the owl that watched him come out of his den, Harky Mundeel peered furtively around the rear of the cow he was milking to see if his father was watching. He was. Harky sighed and went back to work.

Mun Mundeel had firm opinions concerning the proper way to milk a cow or do anything else, and when other arguments failed he enforced his ideas with the flat of his hand. Harky sighed again. Old Brindle, far and away the orneriest of Mun's five cows and probably anyone else's, had teats remarkably like the fingers of a buckskin glove that has been left out in the rain and then dried in the sun. Coaxing the last squirts of milk from her probably was not so hard as squeezing apple juice from a rock, but it certainly ran a close second.

Since there was no alternative, Harky beguiled the anything-but-fleeting moments with the comforting reflection that winter, after all, was one of his favorite seasons. It could not compare with autumn, when corn rustled crisply in the shock and dogs sniffed about for scent of the coons that always raided shocked corn. Nor did it equal early spring, when trout streams were ice-free and the earth still too wet for plowing.

But it was far ahead of late spring and summer, with their endless farm tasks, each of which was worse than the other. Only by exercising the greatest craft and diligence, and manfully preparing himself for the chastisement he was sure to get when he finally came home, could a man sneak away for a bit of fishing or swimming.

Harky bent his head toward Old Brindle's flank but his thoughts whisked him out of the stable into the hills.

Shotgun in hand, he'd spent a fair portion of yesterday tracking a bobcat on the snow. It was a proved fact that a man on foot cannot catch up with a bobcat that is also on foot. But it was not to be denied that all bobcats have a touch of moon madness. They knew when they were being tracked, but they also knew when the tracker ceased following, and that kindled a fire in their heads.

As long as they were tracked they were comfortable in the knowledge that they had only to keep running. When the tracker stopped, it threw the bobcat's whole plan out of gear. They imagined all sorts of ambushes, and cunning traps, and finally they worked themselves into such a frenzy that they just had to come back along their own tracks and find out what was happening. It followed that the hunter had nothing to do except rile the bobcat into a lather and then sit down and wait.

Harky had waited. But he must have done something wrong, or perhaps the bobcat he followed had not been sufficiently moonstruck. Though it had come back, it had not been so anxious to find Harky that it forgot everything else. Harky had glimpsed it across a gully, two hundred yards away and hopelessly beyond shotgun range. If only he had a rifle—

He hadn't any, and the last time he'd sneaked Mun's out his father had caught him coming back with it. The hiding that followed—Mun used a hickory gad instead of the flat of his hand—was something a man wouldn't forget if he lived to be older than the rocks on Dewberry Knob. Harky lost himself in a beautiful dream.

Walking along Willow Brook, he accidentally kicked and overturned a rock. Beneath it, shiny-bright as they had been the day the forgotten bandit buried them, was a whole sack full of gold pieces. At once Harky hurried into town and bought a rifle, not an old 38-55 like his father's but a sleek new bolt action with fancy carving on breech and forearm. When he brought it home, Mun asked, rather timidly, if he might use it. No, Pa, Harky heard himself saying. It's not that I care to slight you but this rifle is for a hunter like me.

The shining dream was shattered by Mun's, "You done, Harky?"

Harky looked hastily up to see his father beside him. "Yes, Pa," he said.



"Lemme see."

Mun sat down beside Old Brindle and Harky sighed with relief. When Mun Munde could not get the last squirt from a cow, it followed that the cow was indeed stripped. But Mun, conditioned by experience, never completely approved of anything Harky did.

"We'll close up for the night," he said.

Harky scooted out of the barn ahead of his father and gulped lungfuls of the softening wind. It seemed that a man could never get enough of that kind of air. Mun closed and latched the barn door and Harky turned to him.

"It's a thaw wind!" he said rapturously.

"Yep."

"Not the big thaw, though."

"Nope."

"Do you reckon," Harky asked, "it will fetch the coons out?"

Mun deliberated. A subject as serious as coons called for deliberation.

"I don't rightly know," he said finally. "I figger some will go on the prowl an' some won't."

It was, Harky decided, a not unreasonable answer even though it lacked the elements of true drama. Harky gulped another lungful of air and almost, but not quite, loosed the reins of his own imagination. Even seasoned hunters did not argue coon lore with Mun Munde, but on an evening such as this it was impossible to think in prosaic terms.

They lingered near the barn and faced into the wind. Presently Harky stood there in body only. His spirit took him to Heaven.

Heaven, as translated at the moment, was the summit of a mountain ten times as high as Dewberry Knob. From his lofty eminence, Harky looked at a great forest that stretched as far as his eyes could see. Each tree was hollow and each hollow contained a coon. As though every coon had received the same signal at the same time, all came out. There were more coons than a man could hunt if he hunted every night for the next thousand years.

At exactly the right moment, this entrancing scene became perfection. Deep in the great forest, Precious Sue lifted her voice to announce that she had a coon up.

Harky made his way among the great trees toward the sound. He found Precious Sue doing her best to climb a sycamore so massive that ten men, holding each others' hands, could not come even close to encircling the trunk. When Harky shined his light into the tree he saw, not just a coon, but the king of coons. Sitting on a branch, staring down with eyes big as a locomotive's headlight, was Old Joe himself.

The fancy faded, but Harky was left with no sense of frustration because fact replaced it. Somewhere out in the Creeping Hills—the aura that surrounded him considerably enhanced by the fact that no human being knew exactly where—Old Joe really was sleeping the winter away. Suppose that he really came prowling tonight? Suppose Precious Sue really did run him up that big sycamore in the wood lot? Suppose Harky really—? Harky could no longer be silent.

"Pa," he asked, "how long has Old Joe been prowling these hills?"

A man who would speak of coons must think before he spoke. For a full ninety seconds Mun did not answer. Then he said seriously:

"A right smart time, Harky. There's them'll tell you that even if a coon don't get trapped, or shot, or dog kil't, or die no death 'fore his time, he'll live only about ten years anyhow. I reckon that may be so if you mean just *ordinary* coons. Old Joe, he ain't no ordinary coon. My grandpa hunted him, an' my pa, an' me, an' you've hunted him. Old Joe, he's jest about as much of a fixture in these hills as us Munde's."

Harky pondered this information. When he went to school down at the Crossroads, which he did whenever he couldn't get out of it, he had acquired some education. But he had also acquired some disturbing information. Miss Cathby, who taught all eight grades, was a very earnest soul dedicated to the proposition that the children in her care must not grow up to wallow in the same morass of mingled ignorance and superstition that surrounded their fathers and mothers.

Miss Cathby had pointed out, and produced scientific statistics to prove, that the moon was nothing more than a satellite of the earth. As such, its influence over earth dwellers was strictly limited. The moon was responsible for tides and other things about which Miss Cathby had been very vague because she didn't know. But she did know that the moon could not affect birth, death, or destiny.

Old Joe had been the subject of another of Miss Cathby's lectures. He was just a big coon, she said, though she mispronounced it "raccoon." It was absurd even to think that he had been living in the Creeping Hills forever. Old Joe's predecessor had also been just a big raccoon. Since Old Joe was mortal, and like all mortals must eventually pass to his everlasting reward, his successor would be in all probability the next biggest raccoon.

Harky conceded that she had something to offer. But it also seemed that Mun had much on his side, and on the whole, Mun's conception of the real and earnest life was far more interesting than Miss Cathby's. She got her information from books that were all right but sort of small. Mun took his lore from the limitless woods.

"How long have us Mundees been here?" Harky asked.

"My grandpa, your great-grandpa, settled this very farm fifty-one years past come April nineteen," Mun said proudly.

"Where did he come from?"

"He never did say," Mun admitted.

"Didn't nobody ask?"

"'Twas thought best not to ask," Mun said. "Blast it, Harky! What's chewin' on you? Ain't it enough to know where your grandpa come from?"

"Why—why yes."

Confused for the moment, Harky went back to fundamentals. His great-grandfather had settled the Mundeefarm fifty-one years ago. He was thirteen. Thirteen from fifty-one left thirty-eight years that Mundees had lived on the farm before Harky was even born.

Confusion gave way to mingled awe and pride. Old Joe was not the only tradition in the Creeping Hills. The Mundees were fully as famous and had as much right to call themselves old-timers. For that matter, so did Precious Sue. The last of a line of hounds brought to the Creeping Hills by Mun's grandfather, her breed was doomed unless Mun found a suitable mate for her. But better to let the breed die than to offer Precious Sue an unworthy mate.

Mun said, "Reckon we'd best get in."

"Yes, Pa."

Side by side they started down the soggy path toward the house. Precious Sue left her bed on the porch and came to meet them.

She was medium-sized, and her dark undercoat was dappled with bluish spots, or ticks. Shredded ears bore mute testimony to her many battles with coons. Though she ate prodigious meals, every slatted rib showed, her paunch was lean, and knobby hip bones thrust over her back. Outwardly, Precious Sue

resembled nothing so much as an emaciated alligator.

For all the coon hunters of the Creeping Hills cared she could have *been* an alligator, as long as she continued to perform with such consummate artistry on a coon's track. Though a casual observer might have deduced that Precious Sue had trouble just holding herself up, she had once disappeared for forty-eight hours. Mun finally found her under the same tree, and holding the same coon, that she must have run up two hours after starting. She was one of the very few hounds that had ever forced Old Joe to seek a refuge in his magic sycamore, and no hound could do more.

Unfortunately, she lived under a curse. The only pup of what should have been an abundant litter, a bad enough thing if considered by itself, Precious Sue had been born on a wild night at the wrong time of the moon. Therefore, she had a streak of wildness that must assert itself whenever the moon was dark. If she were run at such times, she must surely meet disaster. But as Precious Sue met and fell in beside them, Harky thought only of his dream.

"Do you think Old Joe will prowl tonight?" he asked his father.

"What you drivin' at, Harky?"

"I was thinking Old Joe might prowl, and come here, and Sue will run him up that sycamore in the woodlot, and—"

"Harky!" Mun thundered. "Heed what you say!"

"Huh?" Harky asked bewilderedly.

Mun shook a puzzled head. "I can't figger you, Harky. I can't figger you a'tall. This is the dark of the moon!"

"I forgot," Harky said humbly.

"I reckon you ain't allus at fault for what runs on in that head of yours."

"Hadn't you ought to tie her up?" Harky questioned.

"Sue can't abide ties and no coon'll come here tonight," Mun said decisively. "Least of all, Old Joe."

"But if he does—" Harky began.

"Harky!" Mun thundered. "He won't!"

"Yes, Pa."

Long after he was supposedly in bed, Harky stood before his open window listening to the song of the south wind. Sometimes he couldn't even figure himself.

There'd been last fall, when they jumped the big buck out of Garson's slashing. Mun and Mellie Garson had taken its trail, but Harky had a feeling about that buck. He'd felt that it would head for the rhododendron thicket on Hoot Owl Ridge, and that in getting there it would pass Split Rock. Harky went to sit on Split Rock. Not twenty minutes later, the buck passed beside him. It was an easy shot.

Old Joe would not come tonight because Mun said he wouldn't. But Harky was unable to rid himself of a feeling that he would, and he was uneasy when he finally went to bed.

He slept soundly, but Harky had never been able to figure his sleep either. Often he awakened with a feeling that something was due to happen, and it always did. When the wild geese flew north or south, or a thunder storm was due to break, Harky knew before he heard anything. This night he sat up in bed with a feeling that he would hear something very soon.

He heard it, the muffled squawk of a hen. On a backwoods farm, at night, a squawking hen means just one thing. Harky jumped out of bed and padded to the door of his father's bedroom.

"Pa."

"What ya want?"

"I heard a hen squawk."

"Be right with ya."

Harky was dressed and ready, with his shotgun in his hands, when Mun came into the kitchen. Mun lighted a lantern, took his own shotgun from its rack, and led the way to the chicken house. He knelt beside the little door by which the chickens left and entered and his muffled word ripped the air.

"Look!"

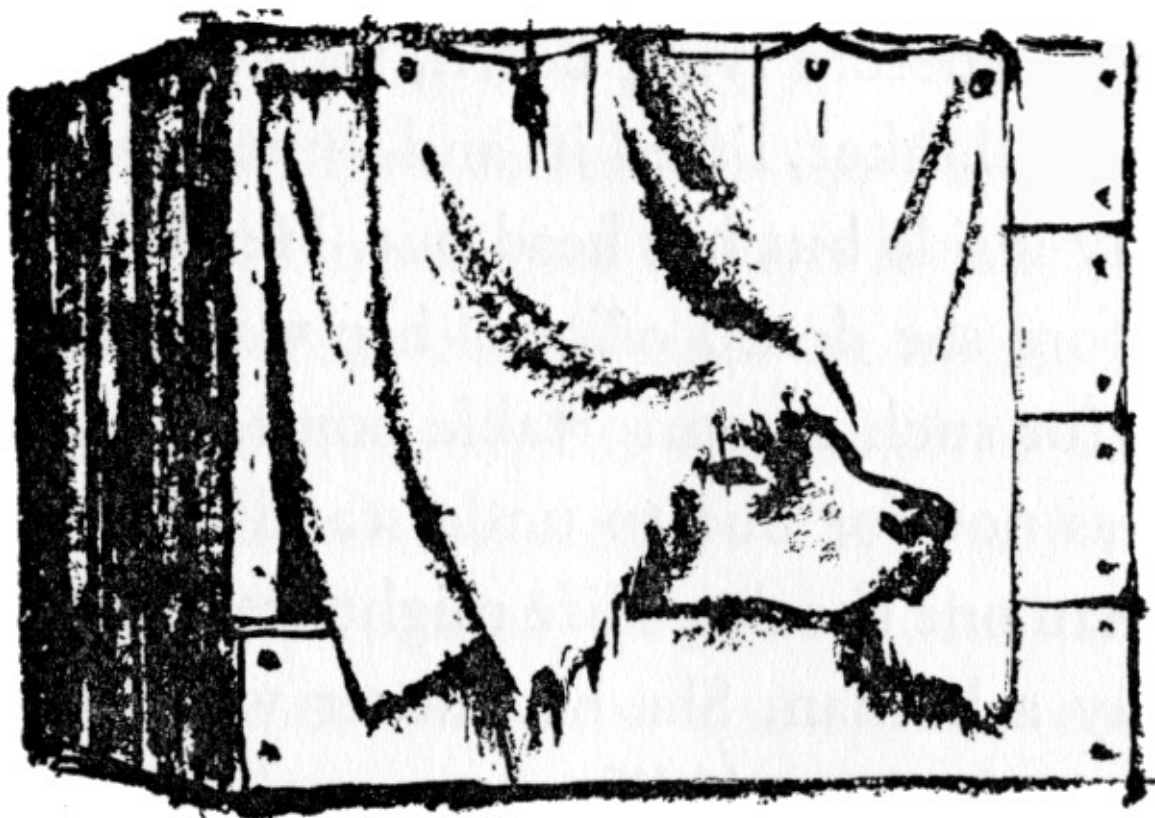
Harky looked. Seeming to begin and end at the little door, the biggest coon tracks in the world were plain in the soft snow. Ten thousand butterflies churned in his stomach. It was almost as though the whole thing were his fault.

He said, "Old Joe."

Mun glanced queerly at his son, but he made no reply as he held his lantern so it lighted the tracks. Harky trotted behind his father and noted with miserable eyes where Sue's tracks joined Old Joe's. They came to the flood surging over Willow Brook, and just at the edge a whole section of ice had already caved in.

Both sets of tracks ended there.





SUE

After Mun and Harky entered the house, Precious Sue crawled into her nest on the porch. The nest was an upended wooden packing case with a door cut in front and a strip of horse blanket hanging over the door to keep the wind out. The nest was carpeted with other strips of discarded horse blanket.

On cold nights, Sue shoved the dangling strip over the door aside with her nose, went all the way in, let the horse blanket drop, and cared little how the wind blew. Tonight, after due observance of the canine tradition that calls for turning around three times before lying down, she stuck her nose under the blanket, lifted it, and went to sleep with her body inside but her head out. Her blissful sigh just before she dozed off was her way of offering thanks for such a comfortable home.

It was not for Sue to understand that in more ways than one the dog's life might well be the envy of many a human. She had never wondered why she'd been born or if life was worth living; she'd been born to hunt coons, and every coon hunter, whether biped or quadruped, found life eminently worth living.

Though she often dreamed of her yesterdays, they were always pleasant dreams, and she never fretted about her tomorrows.

Five seconds after she went to sleep, Sue was reliving one of her yesterdays.

She was hot after a coon, a big old boar that was having a merry time raiding Mun Munde's shocked corn until Sue rudely interrupted. The coon was a wanderer from far across the hills, and last night, with three hounds on his trail, he had wandered unusually fast. When he finally came to Mun's corn, he was hungry enough to throw caution to the winds. And he knew nothing about Precious Sue.

He did know how to react when she burst upon him suddenly. Running as though he had nothing on his mind except the distance he might put between Sue and himself, the coon shifted abruptly from full flight to full stop. It was a new maneuver to Sue. She jumped clear over the coon and rolled three times before she was able to recover.

By the time she was ready to resume battle, the coon was making fast tracks toward a little pond near the cornfield. With a six-foot lead on Sue, he jumped into the pond. When Sue promptly jumped in behind him, the coon executed a time-hallowed maneuver, sacred to all experienced coons that are able to entice dogs into the water. He swam to and sat on Sue's head.

Amateur hounds, and some that were not amateurs, nearly always drowned when the battle took this turn, but to Sue it was kindergarten stuff. Rather than struggle to surface for a breath of air, she yielded and let herself sink. The coon, no doubt congratulating himself on an absurdly easy victory, let go. Sue came up beneath him, nudged him with her nose to lift him clear of the water, clamped her jaws on his neck, and marked another star on her private scoreboard.

Of such heady stuff were her dreams made, and dreams sustained her throughout the long winter, spring, and summer, when as a rule she did not hunt. She could have hunted. There were bears, foxes, bobcats, and a variety of other game animals in the Creeping Hills. All were beneath the notice of a born coon hound who knew as much about coons as any mortal creature can and who didn't want to know anything else.

The squawking chicken brought her instantly awake. The wind was blowing from the house toward Willow Brook, so that she could get no scent. But she pin-pointed the sound, and she'd heard too many chickens squawk in the night not to know exactly what they meant. Seconds later she was on Old Joe's trail.

She knew the scent, for she had been actively hunting for the past five years and had run Old Joe an average of six times a year. But she saw him in a different light from the glow in which he was bathed by Mun and Harky Munde. To them he was part coon and part legend. To Sue, though he was the biggest, craftiest, and most dangerous she had ever trailed, he was all coon and it was a point of honor to run him up a tree.

When she came to Willow Brook, she saw the flood surging over the ice and recognized it for the hazard it was. But except when they climbed trees or went to earth in dens too small for her to enter, Sue had never hesitated to follow where any coon led. She jumped in behind Old Joe, and fate, in the form of the south wind, decided to play a prank.

Ice over which Old Joe had passed safely a couple of seconds before cracked beneath Sue. The snarling current broke the one big piece into four smaller cakes and one of them, rising on end, fell to scrape the side of Sue's head. Had it landed squarely it would have killed her. Glancing, it left her dazed, but not so dazed that she was bereft of all wit.

Sue had swum too many creeks and ponds, and fought too many coons in the water, not to know exactly how to handle herself there. Impulse bade her surrender to the not at all unpleasant half dream in which she found herself. Instinct made her fight on.

Swept against unbroken ice, she hooked both front paws over it. Then she scraped with her hind paws and, exerting an effort born of desperation, fought her way back to the overflow surging on top of the ice. Once there, still dazed and exhausted by the battle to save herself, she could do nothing except keep her head above flood water that carried her more than two miles downstream and finally cast her up on the bank.

For an hour and a half, too weak even to stand, Sue lay where the water had left her. Then, warned by half-heard but fully sensed rumblings and grindings, she alternately walked and crawled a hundred yards farther back into the forest and collapsed at the base of a giant pine. With morning she felt better.

Still shaky, but able to walk, she stood and remembered. Last night Old Joe had come raiding. She had followed him to Willow Brook and lost the trail there, thus leaving unfinished business that by everything a coon hound knew must be finished. Sue returned to Willow Brook and sat perplexedly down with her tail curled about her rear legs.

During the night, while she slept, the ice had gone out as she'd been warned by its first rumblings. She had heard nothing else, but she saw ice cakes that weighed from a few pounds to a few tons thrown far up on either bank. The moving ice had jammed a half mile downstream, and in effect had created a temporary but massive dam. Harky Munde could toss a stone across Willow Brook's widest pool in summer, but a beaver would think twice before trying to swim it now.

With some idea that she had been carried downstream, Sue put her nose to the ground and sniffed hopefully for five hundred yards upstream. It was no use. Everything that normally had business along Willow Brook had fled from the breaking ice. Sue had no idea as to how she would find Old Joe's trail or even what she should do next.

She whined lonesomely. Old Joe had eluded her again, which was no special disgrace because there'd always be a next time. Since she could not hunt, it would be ideal if she could return to the Mundee farm, but she was afraid to try swimming the flood.

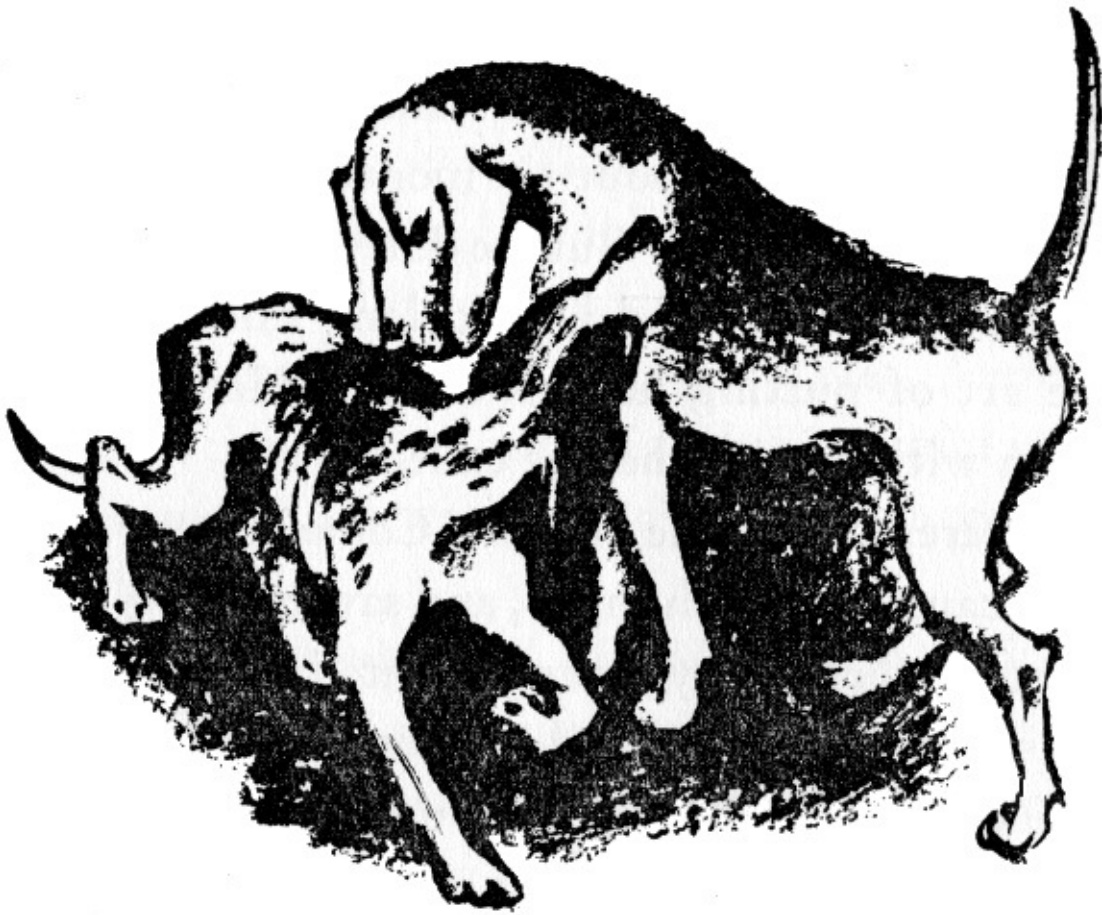
Nosing about, Sue found a two-pound brown trout that had been caught and crushed in the grinding ice and cast up on the bank. She ate the fish, and with food her strength returned. With strength came a return of hound philosophy.

Since there was little point in fighting the unbeatable, and because flooded Willow Brook held no charms, Sue wandered back into the forest. Ordinarily she would have stayed there, eating whatever she could find and returning to the Mundee farm after the flood subsided. But again fate, or nature, or whatever it may be that plays with the lives of human beings and coon hounds, saw fit to intervene.

Sue had been born to hunt coons and she was dedicated to her birthright, but the All-Wise Being who put the moon in the sky did so in the interests of all romance. Sue yearned to meet a handsome boy friend.

To conceive a notion was to execute it, and Sue began her search. She had often hunted this area. For miles in any direction, on the far side of Willow Brook, was wilderness. She did not know of any farmer, or even any trapper, who might have a dog. But she had a sublime faith that if only she kept going, she would find her heart's desire.

Three days later, after passing up three farms that unfortunately were staffed with lady dogs, Sue approached a fourth. It was little better than a wilderness clearing, with a tiny barn, a couple of sheds, and a one-room house. But Sue was not interested in the elite side of human living, and the great black and tan hound that came roaring toward her was handsome enough to make any girl's heart miss a beat.



Sue waited coyly, for though to all outward appearances the huge hound was intent only on tearing her to pieces, she knew when she was being courted. They met, touched noses, wagged tails, and Sue became aware of the man who appeared on the scene.

He was a young man built on the same general proportions as a Percheron stallion, and he hadn't had a haircut for about six months or a shave for at least three years. But he knew a good hound when he saw one and he had long since mastered the art of putting hounds at ease. His voice was laden with magic when he called,

"Here, girl. Come on, girl. Come on over."

Because she was hungry, and saw nothing to distrust in the shaggy young giant, but largely because the great black and tan hound paced amiably beside her, Sue obeyed. She buried her nose in the dish of food the young man offered her and started gobbling it up.

So wholeheartedly did Sue give herself to satisfying her hunger that the rope was about her neck and she was tied before she was even aware of what had happened.

Paying not the least attention to the big bluebottle fly that buzzed her nose, Sue stretched full-length and dozed in the sun. Trees that had been bare when she came to Rafe Bradley's were full-leafed. Flowers bloomed beneath them. Birds had long since ceased chirping threats to each other and had settled down to the serious business of building nests and raising families.

First impressions of Rafe Bradley's farm were more than borne out by subsequent developments. Rafe

kept a good horse, but it was for riding rather than plowing. Besides the horse, Rafe's domestic livestock consisted of some pigs that ran wild in the woods until Rafe wanted pork, which he collected with his rifle.

Rafe, his horse, and his big hound had left early this morning to take care of some important business in the woods. Since Rafe's only important business was hunting something or other, it followed that he was hunting now. Sue raised her head and blinked at the green border around the clearing.

Mun Munde had told Harky that Sue could not abide a rope, and she couldn't. But the rope was there, it had not been off since the day Rafe put it there, and Sue could choose between giving herself a permanently sore neck by fighting the rope and submitting. She did what a sensible hound would do.

If Rafe had not tied her, his big hound would have been sufficient attraction to keep her around for at least a few days. After that, she might have fallen in with life as it was lived at Rafe's and been happy to remain.

Rafe had tied her, and for that he could not be forgiven. Sue lived for the day she would be free to return to Mun Munde. With an abiding faith that everything would turn out for the best if only she was patient, Sue was sure that day would come. Until it did, she might as well sleep.

The bluebottle fly, tiring of its futile efforts to annoy her, buzzed importantly off in search of a more responsive victim. Sue opened one bloodshot eye then closed it again. She sighed comfortably, went back to sleep, and was shortly enjoying a happy dream about another coon hunt.

When the sun reached its peak she rose, lapped a drink from the dish of water Rafe had left for her, and sought the shade of her kennel. Rafe would return with evening. She would be fed, sleep in her kennel, and tomorrow would be another day.

Rafe did not come with twilight. The rope trailing beside her like a rustling worm, Sue came out of her kennel and whined. She was not lonesome for Rafe, but she was hungry. Sue paced anxiously for as far as the rope would let her go.

Whippoorwills, flitting among the trees at the borders of the clearing, began their nightly calling. She lapped another drink and resumed her hungry pacing. Then, just before early evening became black night, the whippoorwills stopped calling. A moment later it became apparent that someone was coming.

Their arrival was heralded by an unearthly clatter and rattling that puzzled Sue until they entered the clearing. Then she saw that they were two men in a car, a marvelous vehicle held together with hay wire and composed of so many different parts of so many different cars that even an expert would have had difficulty determining the original make. The car quivered to a halt and one of the two men bellowed at the dark house,

"Rafe! Hey, Rafe! Whar the blazes be ya, Rafe?"

There was a short silence. The second man broke it with a plaintive,

"Kin ya tie that? First night in two years coons raid our ducks, Rafe an' that hound of his gotta be chasin'!"

"He would," the first man growled.

The second's roving eye lighted on the kennel and then noticed Sue. "Thar's another hound."

"Ya don't know," the first said, "that it'll hunt coons."

The second declared, "If it's Rafe's, it'll hunt coons. I'm goin' to git it."

"Keerful," the first man warned. "That Major hound'll take the arm off anybody 'cept Rafe what tries to touch it."

"Le's see what this'n does."

The second man left the hybrid car and approached Sue, who waited with appeasing eyes and gently wagging tail. When the man laid his hand on her head, Sue licked his fingers.

"Tame's a kitten," the man declared jubilantly. "I'll fetch her."

He untied the rope, and the instant she was free, Sue slipped aside and raced toward the woods. Not in the least affected by the anguish, "Here, doggie! Come on back, doggie!" that rose behind her, she entered the forest at exactly the same point she'd left it to meet Rafe Bradley's hound.

The cries faded and only the whisper of the wind kept her company as Sue traveled on. Suddenly there was a great need that had not existed before to put distance between herself and Rafe Bradley's clearing. Sue traveled until near morning, then crawled gratefully beneath the thick branches of a wind-toppled pine. She turned around and around to smooth a bed.

The sun was just rising when her pup was born.

Almost five months after she left it, Precious Sue came once again into her own land. Where she had once been gaunt, she was now little more than a skeleton. But the pup that frisked beside her, and was marked exactly like her, was fat and healthy enough. There just hadn't been enough food for two.

Precious Sue fell, and the pup came prancing to leap upon her, seize her ear, and pull backwards while it voiced playful growls. Sue got up. Head low, staggering, she labored over a fallen sapling that the pup leaped easily. She reached the top of the hill she was trying to climb.

From the summit, she saw Willow Brook sparkling like a silver ribbon in the sunshine. Just beyond were the buildings of the Munde farm. Sue sighed happily, almost ecstatically, and lay down a second time.

She did not get up.



HARKY GOES FISHING

When Mun sent him out to hoe corn, Harky knew better than to protest or evade. An outright refusal would instantly bring the flat of Mun's hand against the nearest part of Harky's anatomy that happened to be in reach. Evasion would rouse Mun's suspicions, and like as not bring a surveillance so close that Harky would find escape impossible.

Campaigns must be planned. When Mun said, "You go hoe the corn," Harky answered meekly, "Yes, Pa," and he did his best to seem enthusiastic as he shouldered the hoe and strode off toward the cornfield.

The field was a full three hundred yards from the house, and if one were fleet enough of foot, one might throw one's hoe down the instant one arrived and simply start running. Harky had long ago learned the futility of such tactics.

Mun was winded like a bear, gifted with the speed of a greyhound, and he knew all the hiding places Harky might be able to reach if all he had was a three-hundred-yard start. He knew some that were even farther away. When it came to finding his son, Harky sometimes believed, Mun had a nose fully as keen as Precious Sue's when she was sniffing out a coon.

Sue provided an interesting diversion of thought as Harky marched manfully toward the cornfield. Neither she nor Old Joe had been seen since that fateful night in February, and though of course Old Joe seemed to be immortal, available evidence indicated that Sue had been swept under the ice and drowned in Willow Brook.

It could be, but Harky had a feeling about Sue. She couldn't have been more than a couple of jumps behind when Old Joe jumped into Willow Brook, and if one had escaped, why hadn't both? Though there was always a possibility that the ice had held for Old Joe and broken for Sue, in Harky's opinion, the current where the ice broke should not have been too strong for a swimmer of Sue's talent.

Naturally the catastrophe had not gone unchallenged. Except for essential tasks, farm work ended the day after Sue disappeared. As Mun explained it, a body could always get more cows or pigs, or even another farm. But there was only one coon hound like Precious Sue.

Mun was not unduly optimistic when he began the search, for after all Sue had run in the dark of the moon. But the fact that Sue was doomed by the gods did not prevent Mun's pressing the hunt with utmost vigor. Mun and Harky traveled up Willow Brook and down, visiting every neighbor for nine miles in one direction and eleven in the other.

Mellie Garson hadn't seen Sue. Though Mellie had not seen her, he recognized a genuine emergency and joined the hunt for her. So did Raw Stanfield, Butt Johnson, Bear Pen Crawford, Pine Heglin, and Mule Domster. After two weeks it was sadly concluded that Precious Sue had indeed placed herself beyond hope of redemption when she took after Old Joe in the dark of the moon. The searchers gathered in Mun Munde's kitchen, decided that Sue's mortal remains would come to rest an undetermined number of miles down Willow Brook, since it was impossible to tell where the breakup would carry her, and they drank a solemn toast to the memory of a great coon hound.

And Harky still had a feeling.

He reached the cornfield, and, as though his heart were really in it, started hoeing at the right place. The right place, naturally, was the side nearest the house. Mun Mundeewould have reason to wonder if Harky evinced too much interest in starting near the woods. As he began the first row, which was thirty yards long when one was not hoeing it and thirty miles when one was, Harky mentally reviewed his caches of fishing tackle.

Upstream, thirty steps north, eight east, and ten south from a round rock above the first riffle, which in turn was above the first pool where a snapping turtle with a pockmarked shell lived, a line and three hooks were hidden in a hollow stump. Downstream, on a straight line between the pool where Precious Sue had jumped an almost black coon and the white birch in which she'd bayed it, a line and two hooks were concealed in last year's nest of a song sparrow.

Harky worried about that cache. It had been all right two days ago because he'd seen it, and most birds had already nested. But some would nest a second time, and the ruins of this old nest might be summarily appropriated for a new one. His line would disappear, too, and like as not his hooks. Birds were not particular as long as they had something to hold their nest together. As soon as he found another place not likely to attract Mun's eye, perhaps he'd better move his tackle from the nest. Good hooks and line were not so easy come by that a man could get reckless with them.

Leaning slightly forward, the position in which Mun thought the wielder of a hoe would do most work, and slanting his hoe at the angle Mun favored, Harky sighed resignedly as the blade uncovered a fat and wriggling earthworm. He did not dare pick it up and put it in his pocket—Harky had never seen the need of bait containers—for there were times when Mun seemed to have as many eyes as a centipede had legs, and an eagle's sight in all of them. If he saw Harky put anything in his pocket—and he would see—he'd be present on the double.

Well, there were plenty of worms to be had by probing in moist earth near pools and sloughs. The trouble with them was that they were accustomed to water, and they did not wriggle much when draped on a hook and lowered into it. Garden worms, on the other hand, were so shocked by an unfamiliar environment that they wriggled furiously and attracted bigger fish.

The sun grew hot on Harky's back, but his body was too young, too lithe, and too well-conditioned, to rebel at this relatively light labor. His soul ached. Of all the vegetables calculated to bedevil human beings, he decided, growing corn was the worst.

He tried to find solace by thinking of the good features of corn, and happily alighted on the fact that it attracts coons. Also, it tasted good when stripped milky from the stalk and either boiled or roasted. However, the coons would come anyhow. If there was no corn, they'd still be attracted by the apples in Mun's orchard. And if the Mundees had no corn, neighbors who did would be glad to share with them. Meanwhile, this patch must be hoed a few million times.

Harky pondered a question that has bemused all great philosophers: how can humans be so foolish?

Working at that rhythmic speed which Mun considered ideal for hoeing corn, missing not a single stroke, Harky went on. Discontent became anguish, and anguish mounted to torture, but Harky knew that the wrong move now might very well be ruinous. Like all people with great plans and strong opposition, he must suffer before he gained his ends. But he'd suffer only half as much if the master strategy he'd worked out did not fail him.

Exactly halfway across the first row, Harky turned and started back on the second.

It was a bold move, and Harky's heart began to flutter the instant he made it, but the situation called for bold moves. Harky did not break the rhythm of his hoeing or look up when he heard Mun approach, and he managed to look convincingly astonished when Mun asked,

"What ya up to, Harky?"

Harky glanced up quickly. "Oh. Hello, Pa!"

"I said," Mun repeated, "what ya up to?"

"Why—What do ya mean, Pa?"

"You know blasted well what I mean," Mun growled. "You didn't do but half the first row."

"Oh," Harky might have been a patient teacher instructing a backward pupil. He gestured toward tall trees that, in a couple of hours, would keep the sun from the far half of the corn patch. "The sun, Pa. It's high and warm now, but it'll be high and hot time I get this first half done. Then I can work in shade."

Mun scowled, suspecting a trick and reasonably sure there was one, but unable to fly in the face of such clear-cut logic. If he thought of it, he conceded, he'd plan to hoe the corn that way himself. As he turned on his heel and started walking away, he flung another warning over his shoulder.

"I hope ya don't aim to scoot off an' go fishin'."

"Oh no, Pa!"

Suddenly, because he'd have to hoe only half the corn patch, Harky's burdens became half as heavy. It had worked, as he'd hoped it would, and the most tangled knot in his path was now smooth string. Of course he was not yet clear. But even Mun could not watch him constantly, and once he was near enough the woods to duck into them, Harky would be satisfied with a ninety-second start.

Two hours later, having hoed his way to the edge of the woods, Harky dropped his hoe and started running.

When Mun Munde would shortly be on one's trail one must ignore nothing, and all this had been planned, too. Harky took the nearest route to Willow Brook.

So far so good, but strictly amateur stuff. Mun, who'd need no blueprint to tell him where Harky had gone, would also take the shortest path to Willow Brook. Harky put his master strategy into effect.

Coming to a patch of mud on the downstream side of a drying slough, Harky ran straight across it the while he headed upstream. He emerged on a patch of new grass that held no tracks, leaped sideways to a boulder, and hop-skipped across Willow Brook on exposed boulders. Reaching the far side, he ran far enough into the forest to be hidden by foliage and headed downstream.

With the comfortable feeling of achievement that always attends a job well done, Harky slowed to a walk. Mun, hot in pursuit and even more hot in the head, would see the tracks leading upstream. Thereafter, for at least a reasonable time, he would stop to think of nothing else. By the time he did, and searched all the upstream hiding places, Harky would be a couple of miles down. He knew of several pools that had their full quota of fish, and that were so situated that a man could lie behind willows, fish, and see a full quarter of a mile upstream the while he remained unseen.

His heart light and his soul at peace, Harky almost started to whistle. He thought better of it.

Mun Mundee never had mastered the printed word. But his eyes were geared to tracks and his ears to the faintest noises. If Harky whistled, he might find his fishing suddenly and rudely interrupted. The softest-footed bobcat had nothing on Mun when it came to silent stalks. More than once, when Harky thought his father was fuming at home, Mun had risen up beside him and applied the flat of his hand where it did the most good.

Harky contented himself with dancing along, and he never thought of the reckoning that must be when he returned home tonight, because in the first place tonight was a long ways off. In the second, there were always reckonings of one sort or another. A man just had to take care he got his reckoning's worth.

Harky halted and stood motionless as any boulder on Dewberry Knob. A doe with twin fawns, and none of the three even suspecting that they were being watched, moved delicately ahead of him. Harky frowned.

It was a mighty puzzling thing about deer, and indeed, about all wild creatures. Except for very young poultry, a man could tell at a glance whether most farm animals were boys or girls, and that was that. He could never be sure about wild ones, largely because he could never come near enough, and there might be something in Mellie Garson's theory that the young of all wild creatures were alike, a sort of neuter gender, until they were six months old. Then they talked it over among themselves and decided which were to be males and which females. Thus they always struck a proper balance.

It was a sensible system if Mellie were correct, though Harky was by no means sure that he was. Neither could he be certain Mellie was wrong, and as the doe and her babies moved out of sight, Harky wondered what sex the two fawns would choose for themselves when they were old enough to decide. Two does maybe, or perhaps two bucks, though it would be better if one were a doe and the other a buck. Both were needed, and the Creeping Hills without deer would be nearly as barren as they would without coons.

When the doe and her babies were far enough away so that there was no chance of frightening them—a man never would get in rifleshoot of a buck if he scared it while it was still a fawn—Harky went on down the creek. He stopped to watch a redheaded woodpecker rattling against a dead pine stub. He frowned. The next job Mun had slated for him was putting new shingles on the chicken house, and the woodpecker's rattling was painfully similar to a pounding hammer moving at about the same speed that Mun would expect Harky to maintain.

Obviously finding something it did not like, the woodpecker stopped rattling, voiced a strident cry, and flew away. It was a bad omen, and Harky's frown deepened. He'd seen himself in the woodpecker. Just as the bird had come to grief, so Harky was sure to meet misfortune if he tried shingling the chicken house.

He'd have to think his way out of that chore, too. But the shingling was still far in the future, and the only future worth considering was embodied in what happened between now and sundown. Troubles could be met when they occurred.

When Harky was opposite the pool where Precious Sue had jumped the almost black coon, he turned at right angles. It was scarcely discreet to go all the way and show one's self at the edge of Willow Brook, for though Mun should have been lured upstream, he might have changed his mind and come down.

As soon as he could see the pool through the willows that bordered it, Harky turned and sighted on the white birch in which Sue had finally treed the coon.

He was about to start toward it but remained rooted. Suddenly he heard Precious Sue growl. Not daring to believe, but unwilling to doubt his own ears, Harky turned back to the pool.

He peered through the willows and saw the pup.



DUCKFOOT

By some mischance, one of the willows bordering the pool grew at a freakish angle. A two-pound sucker, probably coon-mauled or osprey-dropped somewhere upstream, had washed down and anchored beneath the misshapen tree. Its white belly was startlingly plain in the clear water.

When Harky came on the scene, the pup was trying to get that sucker. Harky almost called, certain that he had finally found Precious Sue. Then he knew his error. The pup was marked exactly like Sue, and at first glance it seemed exactly the size of Sue. But though it was big for its age, and was further magnified by the water in which it swam, undoubtedly it was a puppy.

Since wild horses couldn't have torn him away, Harky stayed where he was and watched.

The pup couldn't possibly have scented the fish, for the water would kill scent. Therefore he must have seen it and known what he was looking at. Now, despite a certain awkwardness that was to be expected in a pup, he seemed as comfortably at home in the water as Old Joe was in Mun Munde's chicken house.

He made a little circle, head cocked to one side so that he might peer downward as he swam. For a moment he held still, paws moving just enough to keep him from drifting in the gentle current. Then he dived.

Smooth as a fishing loon, the pup went down headfirst and straight to his objective. Reaching the anchored sucker, he swiped at it with a front paw. The sucker did not move. The pup, who did not seem to know that he was where no dog should be and trying what no dog should try, made another attempt. Failing a second time, he tried a third.

Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, Harky voiced the astonishment that he had not dared express while the pup was in hearing:

"Jinglin' all peelhaul! Sue's pup for sure!"

There couldn't be the slightest doubt. A hound pup was one thing. A hound pup that looked exactly like Sue, down to the last blue tick, might leave room for argument. But there was no disputing the lineage of a hound pup that even growled exactly like Sue. Harky had heard her do it a hundred times, always when she was frustrated by something or other.

Once more his feeling had served him well. Sue had not drowned in Willow Brook that black night when she was so hot on Old Joe's trail. However, neither had she followed him across. As close as she'd been, she'd have treed him sure. Even though Old Joe would have taken care to climb a tree with one or more escape routes, Sue would have barked as soon as she got him up. Harky and Mun, who'd lingered near the broken ice for the better part of an hour, would have heard her bark.

Something had happened, and though Harky did not know what it was, he suspected that the broken ice provided the proper clue. If it had broken under Sue, and evidently it had, perhaps she'd been hurt. Somehow or other she'd made it across Willow Brook and the breakup had kept her there. Trapped, unable to come home, she'd gone wandering in search of a mate. She'd found one.

Which one? A hound obviously, and a big one, but Harky knew every hound this side of Willow Brook,

and neither the blood nor the characteristics of any were evident in the pup. It must have been a coon hound, for none except coon hounds had reason to work in the water, and the pup combined Sue's aquatic skill with some other hound's genius. A hound that could not only dive, but apparently was capable of remaining submerged for as long as it chose, was a marvel fully as astounding as the two-headed calf that had been born to Mellie Garson's mule-footed cow.

It was what one might expect from a mule-footed cow, Mun opined, and anyway the calf lived only a few hours. The pup was not only alive, but Harky himself was watching it. This day, he told himself, would long be remembered in the annals of the Creeping Hills.

The pup, finally needing air, glided up through the water as gracefully as a trout rising to a fly. Not knowing whether he'd spook, Harky held very still. But he could not control his imagination, and, after the pup dived, what held him down? Fish were able to do as they pleased because, as everyone knew, they gulped water to make themselves heavy when they wanted to go down and spit it out to eject ballast when they wanted to come up. Loons, grebes, and some species of ducks had mastered the same trick. But the only animals that knew it, probably because they spent so much time in the water that they could see for themselves what the fish did, were beavers and muskrats.

Harky had a sudden feeling. Far and away the greatest coon hound ever to run the Creeping Hills, Precious Sue would never run again. If she were alive, she'd be with the pup. But Harky's new feeling had to do with the thought that the pup was destined to become even greater than his mother.

The pup growled once more. Harky rubbed his eyes, certain that he was hearing Sue. He looked away and back again before he convinced himself that he was watching the pup.

Swimming so smoothly that there was scarcely a ripple in his wake, the pup made another circle. Harky's heart pumped furiously as he realized what was happening.

The pup, who probably had tried to retrieve the fish a dozen times, was not working blindly. Having learned from past mistakes, he was planning this new attempt in a brand new way. Rather than go straight down, he turned, swam four feet away, then turned again and dived at a forty-five degree angle.

This time he aimed at the willow stalk rather than the anchored fish. He struck with his shoulder so hard that the willow's topmost leaves rattled, but the stalk moved aside and the fish floated free.

Floating slowly upward, the fish was within three inches of the surface when it was seized by a swift little current and whisked away. Breaking water exactly where the sucker should have been, the pup was bewildered. But he remained at a loss for only a split second.



Splashing for the first time, he churned mightily, raised his forequarters high, looked all around, and sighted the fish. Now it was about a dozen feet away. The pup overtook it, grasped it in his mouth, and

circled back toward shore.

With one mighty leap, Harky landed in knee-deep water. He hadn't dared move while the pup was in the shallows near the bank, for there was too much chance that it might slip around him, run into the brush, and escape. But not even a pup as talented as this one could swim fifteen feet and get away.

The water rose to Harky's thighs, then to his belt. Watching him, but not dropping the sucker, the pup made a downstream circle designed to carry him around Harky and into the willows. His eyes were calculating, his manner the calm and detached air of one who knows exactly what he's doing.



Water lapped Harky's armpits, and he knew that he was going to win but not by a comfortable margin. With another foot or so of lead, or a second more, the pup would get away.

When a yard and a half separated them, Harky flung himself forward, enfolded the pup with both arms, and clasped it to his chest. Being caught, the pup dropped his fish. Sinuous as a snake and swift as a hummingbird, he brought his head around, scored Harky's arm with needle-sharp puppy teeth, and blood seeped out of the scratches.

"Ouch!" Harky gritted. "Leetle devil!"

Holding the pup with his right arm, he clamped his left hand around its neck so the pup could not turn and bite again. The pup whined. When Harky petted him gently, his whine changed to a warning growl. Harky pondered the entire situation.

Here was the proper place to teach manners, but the pup was not without justice on his side. He had located the fish and worked hard to get it. Therefore he should have it. Now in quiet water, the fish was bobbing against Harky's chest. He let go of the pup's neck, grabbed at the fish, and the pup bit him again before he was able to grasp it.

"Cut it out!" Harky ejaculated. "I'm just trying to help you!"

Now that the fish was in Harky's hand, the pup forgot all about biting. He extended his muzzle, licked his chops, and wriggled. When Harky held the fish near enough, the pup bit off a chunk of tail and swallowed it whole. Three bites later, the fish was eaten.

"You ain't just hungry," Harky commented. "You're starved."

The pup sighed, snuggled against Harky's chest, and then turned to look him full in the face. Harky looked back. The pup was Sue all over again except for his eyes. Hers were gentle. His could be, but they could also be proud and fierce. Harky thought of Mun.

"I think you'd as soon be friends," Harky said, "but something tells me nobody will ever take a switch to

you. Whoever thinks you need a hiding had best use a club."

Oddly as though he wanted to shake hands, the pup raised a forepaw to Harky's left palm. Harky's heart skipped a beat. He gulped, wondering if he felt what he thought he did and not daring immediately to feel again. Then he did and almost threw the pup back into the pool.

"If I hadn't felt it!" he gasped, "I couldn't no ways believe it!"

No lightning flashed in the blue sky and no thunder pealed. Bright day did not turn to black night. Harky felt the paw again, then steeled himself to look. He gulped, but because no supernatural forces descended upon him, he first felt and then looked at the pup's other three paws.

There was no shade of doubt. Each of the pup's toes was joined to the next by a webbing of skin. Sue had given birth to a duck-footed hound!

Suddenly it occurred to Harky that he was still waist-deep in Willow Brook, and that nothing special was to be gained by staying there. Carrying the pup, who seemed satisfied to be carried now that he was no longer so hungry, Harky waded back to the bank. His awe mounted. Since he was born with a duck's feet, no wonder Sue's pup could swim like a duck. Dripping water, Harky climbed the bank.

"What are we going to do with you, Duckfoot?" he asked.

Duckfoot answered that question by wriggling, rolling sidewise, and jumping to the ground. Harky sighed with relief. If the pup was allied with witches—and how else could duck feet on a dog be explained?—now was the time for him to disappear in a flash of flame and a cloud of smoke and return to the infernal regions from which he had emerged.

He did nothing except sit down, blink solemnly at Harky, and wag his tail. Harky had a fleeting thought that almost frightened him all over again. Duckfoot had certainly been touched by sinister forces that no man ever saw.

Man sometimes heard them when they shrieked on the midnight wind or moaned among the forest trees, and decidedly they were better left alone. But suppose, just suppose, that Duckfoot was more hound than spirit? What if the good, as embodied in the hound, was powerful enough to overcome the bad, which was surely represented in webbed feet on a dog? If Duckfoot gave his allegiance to any man ...

Harky trembled when he considered such possibilities. Old Joe himself, who'd been running the Creeping Hills for all of time, could not run away from a duck-footed hound!

In sudden near panic Harky swooped, caught Duckfoot, clutched him tightly, and raced up Willow Brook. He needed experienced counsel. Mun, who knew far more than he about such matters, was the man to advise him.

It never occurred to Harky that deserved punishment awaited his return. And it never occurred to Mun, who knew the ways of his son, that Harky would even think of coming home until he had enjoyed his full day. The hiding wouldn't be any harder.

Mun's first fleeting thought was that Harky had gone insane. Then he noticed the pup in Harky's arms and came incredulously forward.

"What the blazes?"

"Look!"

Harky put Duckfoot down. The pup gave Mun a sober and very critical inspection, then came forward to sniff his shoes.

"Sue's pup!" Mun ejaculated.

Harky looked curiously at his father. He'd never thought much about Mun except that, when it came to running away from trifling farm tasks to engage in worthwhile pursuits, he was a mighty hard man to fool. All he knew at the moment was that, for the first time since that dreadful night when Sue disappeared, Mun looked happy.

Harky fidgeted. He'd like it well enough if Mun always looked happy, but he dared not assume the fearful responsibility of pronouncing judgment on Duckfoot. Nor was it for him to bring a hound that was only part hound into the household. Not even if the hound part was all Precious Sue. Harky steeled himself, caught up Duckfoot, and extended his paw.

"Look!"

For a moment Mun did not speak. Then he discovered his voice.

"Goshamighty! Whar'd ye git that pup?"

"In the pool by the shale bank he was, trying to get a sucker from beneath that crookety willow—"

Mun listened attentively, and when Harky finished he cleared his throat. But he did not speak for a full forty-five seconds.

"I got it figgered now," he said seriously. "When Sue run off that night, she missed Old Joe, but now I know how come she didn't drown. A duck pulled her out of the water."

"A duck?" Harky questioned.

"Not jest a barnyard duck," Mun said, "an' not jest a wild duck neither. It was some big ol' duck, mebbe bigger'n Sue herself, what's been settin' back in the woods for no man knows how many years, jest waitin' to put a spell on Sue."

"What'll we do, Pa?" Harky asked worriedly.

"Watch Duckfoot," Mun declared. "Watch him close an' shoot him the minute we find he's puttin' spells on us. Mebbe he won't. He's anyhow half Sue an' mebbe that'll keep the half that ain't down. Leave him go, Harky."

Harky put Duckfoot down. Just at that moment the single forlorn duck that shared the chicken house with Mun's chickens, chose to stroll past. Duckfoot leaped ecstatically at it, overtook it, bore it down in a flurry of threshing wings, and looked very pleased with himself.

"Sue done that," Mun declared. "She knows what she's fetched on us, an' she's tryin' to make up. But we still got to have a care. Jest as Sue was under a spell in the dark of the moon, Duckfoot is bewitched by ducks."

"What about the duck?" Harky asked practically.

"Take it behind the barn an' pick it," Mun directed. "We'll have it for supper. 'Twas sort of a piddlin' duck anyhow."



THE SUMMER OF OLD JOE

Downstream from the Munde farm, approximately three miles away as the water flows, Willow Brook formed two channels. The main stream, a series of conventional pools and ripples, went sedately about the business of every creek and pursued its way to a river that in turn emptied into the sea. The secondary channel, as though weary of doing the same thing in the same way all the time, stole off to go exploring by itself.

In high water this channel dutifully accepted its share of the spring freshet. But even then it never became too big for its banks; there was plenty of room for surplus water in a swamp through which it dawdled.

In low water, the entrance to the channel was a bare seepage that struggled painfully around rocks and was so unimpressive that few human residents of the Creeping Hills ever bothered to go farther. Only Mun and Harky Munde and Mellie Garson knew that some of the best fishing in Willow Brook was down this channel.

Old Joe knew it, and on this September night he was heading toward one of his favorite pools.

Though the days remained pleasantly warm, the heat of summer was past and the nights were cool without being cold. A light frost draped shriveled grasses, and a first-quarter moon that shone palely upon them made it appear as though someone had been very careless with a large quantity of silver flakes. It was exactly the sort of night Old Joe favored above all others.

He was very well satisfied with himself and his accomplishments as he pursued a leisurely way from a cave in a ledge of rocks where he'd lain up all day. In the summer now ending he'd added new luster to his already shining name and enjoyed himself thoroughly while doing it. Living, seldom a vexing matter for a hunter of his talents, had been ridiculously simple.

Weatherwise, with exactly the right balance of rain and sun, and no prolonged spells of excessive heat, conditions could not have been more ideal. Besides plenty of wild fruit in the woods, gardens bore a bumper crop and Old Joe helped himself whenever he felt like it, which was at least every other night. In addition, Pine Heglin had decided that it would be a wonderful idea if he raised some guinea fowl, and Old Joe had indeed found it wonderful.

In the first place, Pine Heglin had ideas, which is laudable enough if they are good ideas. Most of Pine's were not, but he never convinced himself of that. Pine had an idea that a mongrel was far more effective on coons than any hound can ever be, and his current pride and joy was a big dog of many breeds that Pine considered a canine genius. Actually, the dog hadn't sense enough to get up if he were sitting on a sand burr.

In the second place, most of the thirty guinea fowl that Pine acquired ran true to type and headed for the woods the instant they were released. Though they set up a hideous squawking whenever Old Joe raided their roost, the noise never disconcerted him in the smallest degree. Pine's dog, who couldn't have found a skunk in a packing box, was even less bothersome, and Pine was too stubborn to call in some neighbor who had a good hound.

Old Joe, who'd run ahead of all but two of the coon hounds along Willow Brook, and who feared none of

them, happily raided every garden except Mun Mundee's and Mellie Garson's. He kept away from them because there was a new hound—Duckfoot at Mun's and Morning Glory at Mellie's—roaming each farm. Old Joe wasn't especially afraid of them either. But he had not had an opportunity to find out what they could do, and he hadn't lived to his present size and age by taking foolish chances.

He hadn't the least doubt that in the course of time both Duckfoot and Morning Glory would be on his trail. Old Joe intended to pick the time and place. Future actions in regard to both hounds would be based upon what he found out then.

In spite of the rich living the farms provided whenever he saw fit to take it, Old Joe was far too much the gourmet to spurn the delicacies of the woods and waters. The only reason he did not raid farms every night was that sometimes he felt like eating fresh-water mussels, sometimes he craved fish, sometimes he preferred frogs, and sometimes he yearned for crawfish. Tonight he was in a mood for crawfish.

Coming in sight of Willow Brook's adventurous channel, the big coon halted and stood perfectly still. His was the rapt air of a poetic soul so overcome by the wonders of the night that he must savor them, and perhaps that did account in part for Old Joe's attitude. More important, he'd long ago learned never to cross his bridges until he'd found what was on them, and Old Joe wanted to determine what else might be prowling the channel before he became too interested in hunting crawfish. Finding nothing to warrant concern, he moved nearer the water's edge.

He knew every inch of this channel. The trickle that fed it in low water remained a trickle for a bit more than a hundred yards. Then there were three deep pools separated by gentle ripples. The channel snaked through the forest, pursued a devious route, dozed through a swamp, and rejoined Willow Brook proper three-quarters of a mile from where the pair separated.

The pools and ripples were the proper places to catch fish, the swamp yielded frogs and mussels, and the pool beside which Old Joe halted was the best in the entire channel for crawfish. Old Joe advanced to the edge of the pool, but he did not at once start fishing.

The ambitious first-quarter moon slanted a beam downward in such a fashion that it glanced in a dazzling manner from something directly in front of Old Joe's nose. Spellbound, he stared for a full two minutes.

He yearned to reach out and grasp whatever this might be, and it was half a mussel shell that had been shucked here by a muskrat and fallen white side up. But though he might safely have retrieved this treasure, Old Joe sighed, circled two yards around it, and waded into the pool. Trappers who know all about a coon's inclination to put a paw on anything shiny often bait their traps with nothing else.

Once in the pool, Old Joe went about his fishing with a businesslike precision born of vast experience. Crawfish, whose only means of offense are the pincerlike claws attached to their front end, back away from danger, and this bit of natural history was basic to Old Joe's hunting lore. He slid one front paw beneath each side of a small stone and was ready. There were crawfish under every stone in this pool. Whichever paw Old Joe wriggled, a crawfish would be sure to back into the other.

Before he had a chance to stir either paw, he withdrew both and sat up sputtering. Another coon was coming. As though it were not outrageous enough for a coon or anything else to trespass on a pool that Old Joe had marked for his private fishing, the stranger paid not the slightest attention to his warning growl.

Obviously the intruder needed a lesson in manners and Old Joe would be delighted to teach it. When the strange coon came near enough, he discovered the reason for its lack of courtesy. It was a mere baby, a

little spring-born male, and it hadn't learned manners. But it would. Old Joe launched his charge.

The trespasser stopped, squalled in terror, and with Old Joe in hot pursuit, turned to race full speed back in the direction from which he had come. Seventy-five yards from where he started, Old Joe rounded a tussock and stopped so suddenly that his chin almost scraped a furrow in the sand.

Just in front of him, her bristled fur making her appear twice her usual size, was the same mate whose den tree he'd sought out when he left the great sycamore in February. Old Joe was instantly transformed from an avenger bent on punishment to a husband bent on appeasement. Experience had taught him how to cope with every situation except that which must arise when he chased his own son, whom he did not recognize, and came face to face with his mate, whom he definitely did.

Old Joe had time for one amiable chitter. Then, in the same motion, she was upon and all over him. Her teeth slashed places that Old Joe hadn't previously known were vulnerable while her four paws, that seemed suddenly to have become forty, raked. For a moment he cowered. Then, since she was obviously in no mood to listen even if he had known how to explain that it was all a mistake, he turned in inglorious flight.

She chased him a hundred yards and turned back. Old Joe kept running. He reached the other channel, swam Willow Brook, climbed the opposite bank, and finally slowed to a fast walk. He hadn't seen his mate since they'd left her den tree to go their separate ways, and he hadn't had a single thought for either his wife or his two sons and three daughters.

He had one now, a very profound one. They could have the pool where crawfish abounded and, for that matter, both channels of Willow Brook at least for this night. Having met his match, Old Joe hadn't the least desire to meet her again.

He put another half mile between them before he considered himself reasonably safe. With the feeling that he was finally secure, came a realization that his dignity had been sadly ruffled. He was also hungry, but broken pride could be mended and hunger satisfied with one of Pine Heglin's few remaining guinea hens.

No longer threatened, Old Joe became his usual arrogant self. Despite Pine's exalted opinion of his big dog, Old Joe knew the creature for the idiot it was. The guinea hens, though wild, were stupid enough to seek the same roost every night, and they roosted in a grove of small pines. Old Joe, who'd taken his last guinea hen six nights ago, went straight to the grove.

He had no way of knowing that sometimes the gods smile on those who refuse to court favor.

Five days ago, just after Old Joe's last visit, Pine Heglin's cherished mongrel had gone strolling past a limpid pond on Pine's farm. He'd looked into the water, seen his own reflection, decided that he was being challenged by a big and rather ugly dog, and promptly jumped in to give battle. The reflection disappeared as soon as he was in the water, but reflections were too complex for one of his mental capacity. All he knew was that he had seen another dog. He was sure that it must be lurking in the pond, and though he never got many ideas, he stuck by those he did get. Presently, still looking determinedly for the other dog, he sank and did not come up.

Though Pine could have borrowed any hound that any of his neighbors owned, he remained loyal to his conviction that mongrels are superior. He dickered with Sad Hawkins, an itinerant peddler who'd sell or swap anything at any time, and in exchange for six chickens and a shoat Pine got another mongrel.

It was a smaller dog than his former prize, but so tightly packed and heavily muscled that it weighed

nearly as much. With a generous portion of pit bull among his assorted ancestors, the dog feared nothing. He differed from Pine's former mongrel insofar as he had some sense.

Knowing as well as Old Joe where his guinea hens roosted, and aware of the fact that they were being raided, Pine left this dog in the grove with them. Thus came Old Joe's second shock of the night.

The dog, who wouldn't waste time barking or growling if he could fight, achieved complete surprise and attacked before Old Joe even knew he was about. Since he couldn't run, he had to fight.



The weight was nearly even, with the dog having perhaps a five-pound advantage. In addition, before he came into the possession of Sad Hawkins, he'd made the rounds of behind-the-barn dog-fights and he had never lost one. He could win over most coons.

The dog was a slugger. But Old Joe was a scientific boxer who knew better than to stand toe-to-toe and trade punches. He yielded to the dog's rushes even while he inflicted as much punishment of his own as possible. However, the battle might have been in doubt had it not been for one unforeseen circumstance.

Hard-pressed by a determined and fearless enemy, Old Joe reached deep into his bag of tricks. He knew the terrain, and some fifteen feet away was a steep little knoll. It was elemental battle tactics that whatever might be in possession of any height had an advantage over whatever might attack it. At the first breathing spell, Old Joe scurried to the knoll, climbed it, and waited.

He was more than mildly astonished when the dog did not rush immediately. But the dog hadn't had a keen sense of smell to begin with. The numerous fights in which he'd engaged wherein his hold on a vanquished enemy was broken with a liberal application of ammonia, had ruined the little he did have. The dog was now unable to smell a dish of limburger cheese on the upwind side if it was more than three feet away, and he could not renew the battle simply because he couldn't find his enemy.

Never one to question good fortune, Old Joe turned and ran as soon as he could safely do so. First he put distance between himself and Pine Heglin's remaining guinea hens, that were standing on the roost screeching at the tops of their voices. Next he made a resolution to leave Pine's remaining guinea hens alone, at least for as long as this dog was guarding them.

Hard on the heels of that came anger. One needn't apologize for running away from one's angry mate. To be vanquished by a dog, and not even a coon hound, was an entirely different matter. Old Joe needed revenge, and just as this necessity mounted to its apex, he happened to be passing the Mundee farm.

Ordinarily he'd never have done such a thing. He knew nothing about Duckfoot, and a cornfield, with the nearest safe tree a long run away, was a poor place to start testing any unknown hound. Old Joe was too angry to rationalize, and too hungry to go farther. He turned aside, ripped a shock of corn apart, and was in the act of selecting a choice ear when Duckfoot came running.

In other circumstances, Old Joe would have stopped to think. Duckfoot, who would have the physical proportions of his father, had almost attained them. But he was still very much the puppy and he could have been defeated in battle.

Old Joe had had enough fighting for one night. He reached Willow Brook three jumps ahead of Duckfoot, jumped in, ran the riffles and swam the pools for a quarter of a mile, emerged in a little runlet, ran up it, and climbed an oak whose upper branches were laced with wild grapevines. The vines offered a safe aerial passage to any of three adjoining trees. Finding him now was a test for any good hound.

A half hour later, Old Joe was aroused by Duckfoot's thunderous tree bark. The big coon crossed the grapevine to a black cherry, climbed down it, jumped to the top of an immense boulder, ran a hundred yards to a swamp, crossed it, and came to rest in a ledge of rocks. This time Duckfoot needed only nineteen minutes.

Old Joe sighed and went on. The night was nearly spent, he needed safety, and the only safe place was his big sycamore. After the most disgusting night of his life, he reached and climbed it. He hoped that if he managed to get this far, Duckfoot would drown in the slough. But in an hour and sixteen minutes Duckfoot was announcing to the world at large that Old Joe had gone up in his favorite sycamore.

Old Joe sighed again. Then he curled up, but even as he dozed off, he was aware of one thing.

Duckfoot was a hound to reckon with.



MISS CATHBY

His books strapped together with a discarded bridle rein, and dangling over his shoulder, Harky Munde placed one reluctant foot after the other as he strode down the dirt road.

The events that culminated in this dreadful situation—returning to Miss Cathby's school at the Crossroads—had for the past three days been building up like a thunderstorm, and on the whole, it would have been easier to halt the storm. Every autumn, just after the harvest, Mun acquired firm ideas concerning the value of higher education for Harky. But never before had Mun resorted to such foul tricks or taken such unfair advantage.

Coming to where Tumbling Run foamed beneath a wooden bridge and hurled itself toward Willow Brook, Harky halted and rested both elbows on the bridge railing. He looked glumly into the icy water, along which coons of high and low degree prowled every night, and he wished mightily that he were a coon.

Though even coons had their troubles, Harky had never known of a single one that had been forced to hoe corn, milk cows, feed pigs, pitch hay, dig potatoes, or do any of the other unspeakable tasks that were forever falling to the lot of human beings. But even farm chores were not entirely unbearable. In a final agony of desperation, his cause already lost, Harky had even pointed out to Mun that the fence needed mending and hadn't he better cut the posts?

"Blast it!" Mun roared. "Stop this minute tryin' to make a fool of me, Harky! You know's well as I do that the cows ain't goin' to be out to pasture more'n 'nother three weeks! You need some book lore!"

Harky rubbed the heel of his right shoe against the shin of his left leg and wished again that he were a coon, even a treed coon. Being hound-cornered was surely preferable to becoming the hapless victim of Miss Ophelia Cathby.

Grasping the very end of the bridle rein, Harky whirled the books around his head. But exactly on the point of releasing the strap and reveling in the satisfying distance the books would fly, Harky brought them to a stop and slung them back over his shoulder.

He sighed. Free to walk the two miles to the Crossroads, with Mun not even in attendance, Harky was anything except free to throw his books away and explore Tumbling Run. When he ran away from farm tasks, which he did at every opportunity, the worst he could expect was the flat of Mun's hand.

But if he did not show up at school this morning, and for as many mornings hereafter as Mun thought necessary, he would never see his shotgun again. Harky lived again the inhuman scene wherein he had been subjected to torture more intense than any mortal should ever endure. Mun took the shotgun, locked it in his tool case, pocketed the key and addressed Harky:

"Thar! Now jest peg on to school, an' I aim to see Miss Cathby an' find out if ya did! Hingein' on what she tells me, ya kin have the shotgun back!"

Harky permitted himself a second doleful sigh. A man could take a hiding even if it were laid on with a hickory gad. But a man might better lose life itself rather than the only gun he had or could hope to get, at least in the foreseeable future. Mun was a man of his word. Harky saw himself in a fiendish trap from which there was no faint hope of escape.

He glanced at the sun, and from the length of the shadows it was casting deduced that it still lacked forty-five minutes of nine o'clock, the hour at which Miss Cathby called her classes to order. If he stuck to the road, forty-five minutes was at least thirty-eight more than he needed to cover the less than a mile remaining between himself and the Crossroads. But there were excellent reasons why he could not stick to the road.

Raw Stanfield, Butt Johnson, Bear Pen Crawford, and Mule Domster all lived upstream from the Mundeefarm. Mellie Garson and Pine Heglin lived down. Harky had not hesitated to walk openly past Mellie's farm, for though Mellie had been an enthusiastic sire, he had begat only daughters. They were all pretty enough to be snatched up the moment they came of marriageable age, and the four oldest were happily married. But girls of all ages were forever gadding about doing silly things that interested girls only. Though they probably would think it a modern miracle, Mellie's eight youngest would not consider it necessary to rub salt in Harky's already-raw wounds simply because he was going to school.

Pine Heglin had specialized in sons, of which he had seven. The six eldest were carbon copies of their father. It was said along Willow Brook that if one cared to give Pine or any of his six elder sons a good laugh in January, one had only to tell them a good joke the preceding April.

The youngest Heglin, named Loring and called Dib, had been born on Halloween and showed it. Every witch who walked must have touched Dib Heglin, and among other questionable gifts they'd bestowed a tongue with a hornet's sting.

Dib was three months older than Harky. He did not go to school. He found endless amusement in the fact that Harky did go. Harky had no wish to meet Dib.

A quarter of a mile on the upstream side of the Heglin farm, Harky started into the woods and stopped worrying. Dib was a not-unskilled woodsman. But he'd never studied in the stark school from which Harky had graduated with honors; anyone able to hide from Mun Mundeefarm could elude fifty Dib Heglins.

A sour chuckle escaped Harky. Dib, who knew how to add two and two, would know that the Mundeefarm's harvest was ended. Nobody would have to tell him that this was the logical day for Mun to expose Harky to some more of Miss Cathby's education. No doubt he'd got up a half hour early just so he could wait for Harky and insult him when he appeared.

Presently, as it always did, the magic of the forest overwhelmed less desirable influences. Miss Cathby and her school, while not far enough away to let Harky forget he'd better be there on time, needn't be faced for the immediate present. Harky found himself wondering.

Duckfoot had grown like a weed in the corn patch, and to the casual observer he was not greatly different from other gangling hound puppies. But a careful scrutiny revealed him as a dog of diverse talents. There was the incident of the root cellar.

Because it would not keep long in warm weather, meat was at a premium along Willow Brook during the summer months. When somebody butchered, it was both practical and practice to share with his neighbors.

Mule Domster butchered a hog, and to the Mundeefarm he brought a ham and a loin. Mun stored both in the root cellar, that was closed by a latch. The latch was lifted by a string dangling down the door. While Duckfoot, who to all appearances was interested only in scratching a flea behind his ear, sat sleepily near, Mun removed the ham.

Shortly afterward, returning for the loin and finding an empty space where it had been, Mun went roaring to the house for his rifle. Since no farmer of the Creeping Hills would think of robbing his neighbor's root cellar, obviously an unprincipled and hungry stranger had come up Willow Brook. Finding no tracks, Mun further declared that he was a cunning stranger.

Harky had a feeling. It was based on the fact that Duckfoot, who normally ate like a horse except that he did not chew his food nearly as much, was not at all hungry when his meal was put before him. It meant nothing, asserted Mun, for he had flushed an early flight of teal from Willow Brook and Duckfoot was perturbed by the ducks. Harky watched the root cellar.

Evening shadows were merging into black night when Duckfoot padded to the door, reared, pulled the latch string with his teeth, and entered. Since Mun was sure to take a dim view of such goings on, Harky never betrayed the thief. All he did was break the latch and replace it with an exterior latch that was not string-operated.

That happened shortly before Duckfoot disappeared for a whole week. To be expected, said Mun, for wild ducks were passing daily now and doubtless Duckfoot had gone in search of his father. But Harky had another feeling.

He'd been with Duckfoot along Willow Brook, or near one of the ponds, when wild ducks flushed. Far from betraying his duck blood, Duckfoot had given them not the slightest attention. Could it be, thought Harky, that a coon, maybe Old Joe himself, had come raiding? Had Duckfoot trailed him, treed him, and stayed at the tree until he was just too tired and hungry to stay longer?

Mun scoffed at such notions. He pointed out that Duckfoot was still a puppy who, as far as anyone knew, had never been on a coon's trail. So what could he know about running coons, especially Old Joe? Harky was indulging in another pipe dream even to think that a puppy, any puppy, would tree a coon and stay at the tree for a week. Precious Sue herself wouldn't have stayed that long.

Harky knew only that Duckfoot was lean as a blackberry cane when he finally came home and that he kept looking off into the forest. If he hadn't treed a coon, he certainly acted as though he had.

In sudden panic Harky realized that he had a scant four minutes left. He began to run, and he burst into Miss Cathby's school just as the last bell was tolling laggards to their desks.

The school was a one-room affair flanked by a woodshed half as big as the school proper. Inside were the regulation potbellied stove, six rows of five desks each, a desk for Miss Cathby, and a plain wooden bench upon which the various classes seated themselves when called to recite. Behind Miss Cathby's desk was the blackboard. If it was not the ultimate in educational facilities, it was a vast improvement over the no school at all that had been at the Crossroads until three years ago.

When Harky ran in, his fellow pupils were seated.

The first grade, consisting of the younger daughters of Mellie Garson and Raw Stanfield, and the youngest sons of Butt Johnson and Mule Domster, was the largest. Thereafter the grades decreased numerically but with an increasing feminine contingent. Boys old enough to help out at home could hardly be expected to waste time in school. Melinda and Mary Garson were the fifth grade, Harky the sixth, and Mildred and Minnie Garson the seventh and eighth.

Miss Cathby smiled pleasantly when Harky came in.

"Good morning, Harold," she greeted.

"Good morning, ma'am," Harky mumbled.

"Is your father's harvest in, Harold?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Harky, who knew his name was Harold but wished Miss Cathby didn't know, squirmed and longed to drop through the floor. With the only other male who even approached his age being Mule Domster's ten-year-old son, he was indeed surrounded.

Miss Cathby, who knew several things not written in textbooks, understood and let him alone. Harky fixed his eyes on the back of twelve-year-old Melinda Garson's slender neck. He calculated the exact spot where a spitball would have the ultimate effect, then decided that it wasn't worth his while to throw one.

The first grade was called for recitation. Solacing himself with the thought that Mun's enthusiasm for booklore seldom endured more than three weeks, Harky escaped in a dream. He had his shotgun, Duckfoot was hot on a coon's trail, and presently they heard his tree bark. Mun and Harky made their way to the tree.

"Harky," said Mun, "git your light beam on that coon."

Harky made ready to shine the treed coon. The words were repeated and he came rudely awake to discover that Miss Cathby was speaking.

"Harold," she said, "are you dreaming so soon?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harky said meekly.

"Well come down here. The sixth grade is called to recite."

Harky rose and shuffled unhappily to the recitation bench. He slumped down, head bent, shoulders hunched, fists in pockets. Never again, he thought, would he have any part in caging a coon. Not even to train Duckfoot. He knew now what cages are like.

"Have you been keeping up with your studies?" Miss Cathby asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said Harky.

"Which books have you been using?" queried Miss Cathby.

"Same ones I used last year," Harky mumbled.

Miss Cathby frowned prettily. Harky's last year's books were for the fifth grade; Harky had started in the fourth solely because he'd been too old to begin in the first. Miss Cathby's frown deepened.

She knew that, with the best of luck, Harky would be under her influence for a maximum four weeks. But Miss Cathby's fragile body harbored a will of granite. If she combined guile with persistence, four weeks were enough to turn this youngster from the heathenish ways of his ancestors and show him at least a glimmer of the one true light.

"Very well," she said pleasantly. "We'll review your last year's arithmetic. If a farmer harvests thirty tons

of hay, sells two thirds and feeds the remainder, how much will he feed?"

Harky shuffled nervous feet and stared past her at the blackboard. "I never could figger that one, Miss Cathby."

Miss Cathby said, "It isn't difficult."

"Parts ain't," Harky admitted. "But parts are. He'll sell twenty tons, always reckoning he can find somebody to buy. The rest just shrivels me up."

Miss Cathby sighed. As soon as she proved to her own satisfaction that these backwoods boys were not morons, they proved her wrong. Anyone able correctly to deduce two thirds of thirty should be able to subtract twenty from thirty. A firm adherent of the idea that sugar entices flies where vinegar will not, Miss Cathby applied the sugar.

"Come, Harold," she coaxed. "If you have thirty potatoes and give twenty away, how many will you have left?"

"Ten," Harky said promptly. "But we was talking about tons of hay, not potatoes, and that ain't what crosses me up."

"What is it that you do not understand?" Miss Cathby pursued.

"What kind of critter a remainder is and how much hay does it eat?"

The fifth, seventh, and eighth grades, as represented by the sisters Garson, filled the room with giggles. Miss Cathby rapped for order and evolved a cunning plan to win Harky's interest and favor by discussing something he did know.

"Do you have a good raccoon hound for the coming season, Harold?"

Miss Cathby composed herself to listen while Harky launched an enthusiastic, and minutely detailed, description of the misadventures of Precious Sue and the wiles of Old Joe. He needed eighteen minutes to reach the thrilling climax, the discovery of Duckfoot and,

"His Pa's a duck," he said seriously.

"A duck!" Miss Cathby gasped.

"Not just a barnyard duck and not just a wild duck," Harky explained patiently. "It was some big old duck, maybe older'n Old Joe himself, that's been setting back in the woods just hoping Sue would come along."

Miss Cathby's eyes glowed with a true crusader's zeal. In all the time Harky had spent in school and all the time he would spend there, she could not hope to impart more than the rudiments of an education. But here was a heaven-sent opportunity to strike at the very roots of the ignorance and superstition that barred his march toward a more enlightened life. Miss Cathby saw past the boy to the father who would be. Strike Harky's chains and he would voluntarily free his children.

"That's impossible, Harold," she began.

Warming to her subject, she sketched the Garden of Eden, traced the history of mankind, disposed of witches and witch hunters in a few hundred well-chosen words, explained the laws of genetics, and finished with conclusive proof that a coon hound cannot mate with a duck.

Harky listened, not without interest. When it came to telling stories, he conceded, Miss Cathby was even better than Mun and almost as good as Mellie Garson. Nor was she shooting wholly in the dark; Harky himself did not believe that Duckfoot had been sired by a duck. But there was something wanting.

For a moment he could not define the lack. Then, happily, he thought of another of Pine Heglin's ideas. If apples were stored so they could not roll, Pine decided, there would be fewer bruised apples. Forthwith he constructed some latticeworks of willow withes, arranged them as shelves, and stored his apples on them. But Pine had forgotten that some apples are big and some small. The small ones fell through the lattices and the big ones became jammed in them. All were bruised, and rotted quickly, with the result that Pine had no apples at all.

Miss Cathby's lecture was like that, Harky decided. She would find an exact niche for Old Joe, Duckfoot, Mun, everything in the world, and she'd never stop to think that few things really belonged in exact niches. Her ideas just didn't have room to grow in. Mun's did.

"Can you prove to me, Harold, that there is any such creature as this witch duck?" Miss Cathby finished.

"No ma'am," said Harky, and he forebore to mention that neither could she prove there wasn't.

By some miracle, the endless day ended. The new books that Miss Cathby gave him strapped in the bridle rein and slung over his shoulder, Harky walked straight up the road. He had a feeling that was justified when he saw Dib Heglin waiting.

"Ya been to see Miss Cathby?" Dib squawked in a voice that would have maddened a sheep. "Did Miss Cathby give ya a bathby?"

Harky shifted the bridle rein from his right hand to his left. Effecting a gait that was supposedly a caricature of Miss Cathby's feminine walk, and was remarkably similar to the waddle of a fat goose, Dib came toward him.

"Ya been to see—?" he began.

They were near enough. Harky's right fist flicked out.

"Ya-ooo!" Dib shrieked.

Harky danced happily on. No day was wholly wasted if it left Dib Heglin nursing a bloody nose.



MELINDA

Mellie Garson sat on an overturned pickle keg sourly contemplating the inequity of fate. If he was no better than the next man, he told himself, neither was he worse. So why should some be rewarded with a free buggy ride while others received a kick from the mules pulling the buggy?

Mellie shifted his right foot, his newest reason for eating bitter bread, and glared at the crutches without which he was helpless. It was indeed a bitter blow, but it seemed to Mellie as he sat there that his entire life had been one blow after another.

Though he was the father of children, the very fact that there was no son among them was a desperate situation. How did one hand a coon hound, not to mention the mass of coon lore that Mellie had acquired during his sixty-seven years on earth, down to a girl child?

The lusty wail of a baby floated out of the house. Mellie shuddered, and only by exercising a heroic effort could he refrain from putting his hands over his ears. It was not that he didn't love his daughters and do for them as a proper father should. But did his thirteenth child, now yelling away in her crib, have to be a girl, too?

Mellie ran down the list of his offspring: Marilyn, Maxine, Martha, Minerva, Margaret, Mildred, Minnie, Melinda, Mary, Maud, Marcy, Marcella, and finally, Michelle. There'd been some hope they'd run out of Ms, but he'd hoped that clear back when Mary arrived and now hope was dead. He couldn't have thought of Michelle. But his daughters could and that, he supposed, was no more than he deserved for exposing them to Miss Cathby's school.

Mellie often wondered if he'd been born in the wrong time of the moon. Maybe he'd even been born in a caul, but he'd never know whence came his talent for fathering girls, because by the time he started wondering his parents had gone to their eternal reward and it was too late to ask them.

He sighed. Thirteen girl children were thirteen facts of life that nobody could change. There were rare intervals, when they didn't all start talking at once, that it was even pleasant to have them around. But how explain the rest of his misfortunes?

Mellie retraced the chain of events that had culminated in this stark tragedy.

Morning Glory, his pup out of Raw Stanfield's Queenie by Butt Johnson's Thunder, showed every indication of becoming a rare coon hound indeed. Though Mellie would have been satisfied had she inherited the talent of either parent, there were reasons to believe that she combined the best of both.

However, Glory must have some education and tonight, this matchless autumn night, Raw Stanfield with Queenie and Butt Johnson with Thunder were meeting at Mun Munde's house. Had they planned a coon hunt, and that only, Mellie would have contented himself with just being heart-broken. But Mun and Harky Munde were going along with Duckfoot and Mellie had been invited to bring Glory. So—

Yesterday he'd been mule-kicked!

Mellie groaned his misery. Glory and Duckfoot had an opportunity to learn their trade under masters such as Queenie and Thunder. Now Glory couldn't go, and what had Mellie ever done to merit such

catastrophe?

No doubt Duckfoot would be there, and thinking of Duckfoot, Mellie wondered why a little of the Mundeeluck couldn't rub off on Mellie Garson. It had been a terrible blow to lose Precious Sue. But to stumble on Sue's pup, even if he was half duck, and to find that he probably would be as good as Sue ever was. How come the Mundees were so favored?

Mellie glanced bitterly around as a mule-drawn wagon came from behind the barn. Morning Glory wagged contentedly behind it and four of Mellie's daughters comprised the crew that was bringing in another load of corn. Mellie fixed his eyes on Melinda.

Twelve years old, limber as a willow withe and pretty as a week-old colt, she was driving the self-same mules that had kicked Mellie right out of a coon hunt. Furthermore, she was driving them more skillfully than her father ever had. Mellie permitted himself a troubled frown.

Certain Melinda would be a boy, and a firm exponent of starting the worthwhile things of life as early as possible, Mellie had even dickered for a hound pup so the two babies might grow up together. Somebody had crossed him up, or sneaked up on him, but Melinda should have been a boy.

She could throw a rock straighter than Harky Mundeel; catch bass when Mellie himself couldn't lure them; handle in perfect safety mules that could kick flies off each other's ears and were anxious to kick anything else; she could do everything most boys could and do it better. If more was needed, Glory adored her with a passion few hounds bestow on any human.

Melinda backed the wagon into the barn, and as her three sisters started to unload the corn, she unhitched the mules and drove them to their stable. A fiendish plan formed in Mellie's brain. Girls were about as welcome on a coon hunt as bees at a sewing circle, but why should Mellie do all the suffering? Melinda came out of the stable and floated toward the house. Mellie came to a decision and called,

"Melinda."

She danced to him on feet that never seemed to touch the ground. "Yes, Pa?"

"Raw Stanfield an' Butt Johnson'll be at Mun Mundeel's come evenin'. They're goin' to take Duckfoot on a coon hunt. How'd you like to go with Glory?"

"Pa! You mean it?"

"Sure I mean it, honey."

She stooped and kissed him, and suddenly Mellie felt sorry for unfortunate fathers who do not have at least thirteen daughters.



Making himself as small as possible, Harky Mundeel kept his fingers crossed and hoped Mun had forgotten he was alive. Everything had worked out so much better than he'd dared hope that surely there must be some mistake.

After eleven days at Miss Cathby's school, he was ready and unwilling to begin the twelfth when he happened to glance toward the pasture. He himself, after helping milk them at half past five, had turned the

cows out. But though he'd turned all six out, only five remained. Old Brindle, Mun's ornery cow, had decided to take herself for a walk. It was nothing that could be ignored. Old Brindle was fast as a deer and if she decided she'd had enough of human society, she'd be as hard to catch.

"You'd best help me get her," Mun said.

"Yes, Pa."

They'd scarcely left the house, when, apparently having decided that the free life is for those who want it, Old Brindle jumped back into the pasture she'd just jumped out of. But instead of turning on Harky and roaring for him to be off to school, Mun said nothing at all.

It had been easy as that, which is why Harky worried. Though it was hard even to imagine Mun's having thoughts to spare for Miss Cathby and her school with a coon hunt coming up, dismal experience had taught Harky that it was easier to forecast the next skip of a sand flea than to anticipate Mun.

Until he knew exactly how the wind was blowing, Harky thought, silence was not only golden but silver, gold and diamonds. If Mun was thinking about sending him back to school, to school he would go. If he was not, an incautious word might start him thinking.

Harky watched furtively as Mun put on his coon-hunting pants, boots, and curled the brim of his coon-hunting hat. Then he went to the tool box for his coon-hunting axe.

"Harky!" he roared. "What's your shotgun doin' in my toolbox?"

"Why," Harky hoped he appeared innocent, "is it in there, Pa?"

"Git it out!"

Harky drew his first easy breath since Old Brindle's escape. If Mun had forgotten why he'd confiscated Harky's shotgun, he'd forgotten about school. The ordeal was over, at least for this year, and Harky was free to concentrate on important matters. For the immediate future, the only matter of importance consisted of wishing it was night so they could go coon hunting.

Evening finally arrived, and, with Queenie and Thunder at their respective heels, Raw Stanfield and Butt Johnson arrived with it. The older hounds sneered in their own fashion at Duckfoot, who enthusiastically sneered right back, and curled up on the porch.

None of the men, as yet, knew that Mellie was sending his daughter to substitute for him. When Queenie, Thunder, and Duckfoot set up a desultory baying, all thought that Mellie would join them shortly. To do so he would follow prescribed etiquette of the Creeping Hills, which involved opening the door and walking in.

When Mellie did not enter, but someone knocked, the four hunters first looked astounded. Then they looked at each other. It was Harky who decided that one way to find out who was knocking would be to go open the door. His astounded bellow made Queenie cringe and sent Thunder slinking from the porch.

"What in tunket do you want?"

"Hello, Harold," Melinda trilled.

She was dressed in the boy's trousers she always wore except when she went to school, a boy's shirt

which immediately gave the lie to the theory that girls can't wear boys' clothing and look like girls, and a denim jacket. Her feet were encased in an old pair of shoes, and a boy's hat was pushed back on her saucy black curls. Without a second glance for Harky, she walked past him into the kitchen.

"Pa's been mule-kicked and can't come," she announced. "I brought Glory."

"Right kind of ya," said Mun. "We'll take good care of her an' see that she gits back."



"Oh, I'll take her back myself," Melinda said. "Pa will expect it."

"Nice of ya to offer," said Mun. "But Harky an' me, we sort of batch it here. The house ain't rightly fixed fer a girl to stay in an' we may be gone all night."

"Don't you worry about that, Mr. Munde,," Melinda reassured him. "I'm going hunting with you."

Harky gagged. Melinda turned to face him.

"You sound as though you've been eating green apples, Harold," she said sweetly. "Have you?"

"Why'n'choo go home?"

"Harky!" Mun roared, but not very loudly, "mind your tongue!"

"Thank you, Mr. Munde," Melinda said, with the barest hint of a sob in her young voice. "You do want me along, don't you?"

"Well uh—" Mun stammered and appealed to Raw Stanfield. "We do want her along, don't we?"

"Well uh—" Raw aped Mun and looked at Butt Johnson.

Butt stuttered, "Why—why—why—" and fixed his gaze on Harky.

"There!" Melinda said triumphantly. "The other three want me! Now what do you say?"

"Hope ya fall in the mud!"

"Harold!" Melinda wrinkled her distinctly fetching nose. "How terrible!"

"Hope ya fall in the mud, an' I'll stomp on your head if ya do!" Harky said.

"Harky!" This time Mun voiced a full-throated roar. "Mind your tongue!"

"Le's get coon huntin'," Raw Stanfield choked. "Le's do anything long's we git out of here!"



OLD JOE UP

Raw Stanfield with the lantern, Butt Johnson with a torch for shining treed coons and a .22 rifle for plinking them out of the trees, Mun with his coon-hunting axe, Melinda with serene self-assurance, and Harky with a miserable feeling that it couldn't be very long now before the whole world went to pot, they set off through the night.

Misery was Harky's only feeling. If he had another, he told himself sourly, he wouldn't dare put stock in it. When girls horned in on coon hunts anything could happen and it probably would.

Harky comforted himself with thoughts of what can happen on coon hunts. He had a soul-satisfying vision of a cold, wet, mud-spattered, and hungry Melinda wandering through the night pleading for Harky to come to her succor. Harky heard, but he let her wander until the last possible second. Then, just as she was about to sink into mud from which she would never rise had it not been for valiant Harky, he lifted her to her feet, took her home, and scuffed scornful feet on Mellie Garson's threshold.

"There!" he heard himself saying. "Let that teach you that girls ought never horn in on coon hunts!"

Harky breathed a doleful sigh. Delightful as this mental image was, in no way did it erase the fact that a girl had horned in on a coon hunt. Harky sought solace by tearing his thoughts away from Melinda and fastening them on something pleasant. He considered the four hounds.

Queenie was a slow and methodical worker who'd never been known to lose a trail she started. Of course they did not get every coon Queenie started; some went to earth in rock-bound burrows and some escaped by devious means. Queenie, who tongued on a trail, was one of the few hounds who'd followed Old Joe to his magic sycamore.

Glory, as yet untried, might and might not adopt her mother's hunting style. Duckfoot—neither Harky nor anyone else had any reason to believe that he'd already tracked Old Joe to his sycamore—was another unknown quantity insofar as his own special way of hunting was concerned. But Harky had no doubt that, after adequate training, Duckfoot would shine, and Glory would do well enough.

Thunder, next to Precious Sue the best coon hound ever to run the Creeping Hills, couldn't be doubted. Big, long-legged, and powerful, Thunder was another hound who'd distinguished himself by tracking Old Joe to the big sycamore. A silent trailer but a tree barker who did credit to his name, Thunder was so fast that he often caught coons on the ground. With six years of hunting experience behind him, he was probably the best of the four hounds on this current hunt.

They were, Harky thought, a pack fit to run in any company. With Thunder to run ahead and jump the coon, Queenie to work out the trail at her own pace and at regular intervals to announce the direction Thunder had gone, and quality pups like Duckfoot and Glory, any coon they struck tonight, with the probable exception of Old Joe, would find his stretched pelt on the barn door tomorrow. Maybe even Old Joe would have a hard time with this pack.

Thinking of coons, Harky was pleasantly diverted for a few minutes more.

Creatures of the season, coons availed themselves of the most of the best of whatever was handy. When they emerged from their dens at winter's end, they liked to fill empty stomachs with buds and tender grass

and flower shoots. As the season advanced, coons conformed. They never spurned vegetation if it was to their liking, but as soon as the spring freshet subsided, they did a great deal of fishing and frog, crawfish, and mussel hunting. When gardens started to bear, the coons varied their diet with green vegetables. As they ripened, both wild and domestic fruits received the attention of properly brought up coons. They were always ready to raid poultry.

At this time of year, with frogs already gone into hibernation, fish inclined to linger in deep pools where even Old Joe couldn't catch them, the crawfish and mussel crop well picked over, and vegetation withered, coons concentrated on fields of shocked corn, such fruit as might cling to branches, and beech and oak groves, where they foraged for fallen beechnuts and acorns.

It was to a beech grove that Raw Stanfield led them.

The black thunderheads that had been surging through Harky's brain changed suddenly to a sky of dazzling blue. Rubber boots were not unknown among coon hunters of the Creeping Hills, but except by a few eccentrics, they were unused. A man trying to make time to a tree-barking hound did not care to be slowed by boots.

Harky licked his lips. God tempered the wind to the shorn lamb, but ice water felt like ice water even to a coon hunter and the grove toward which Raw headed was on the far side of Willow Brook. The water was autumn-low with plenty of exposed stones, but jumping them by daylight and jumping them under lantern light were different matters. Harky wasn't sure that even he could cross at night without getting wet.

It looked as though ladies' night at coon hunts would terminate abruptly and soon. Harky hoped so, and it would be a nice touch indeed if Melinda scraped her shins when she fell in.

Willow Brook glinted in the light as Raw Stanfield held his lantern high to see whether they were approaching a pool or riffle. It was a riffle that purred lazily, and coldly, around exposed stones. Harky grinned in the darkness. It *looked* easy, but there was a trick to it.

Once you started jumping there was no turning back and the stones were unevenly spaced. You had to adjust your jumps accordingly, so that it took a really experienced stone jumper to cross in reasonably dry condition.

Contemplating the joys of watching Melinda come reasonably near drowning, Harky made a shocking discovery.

Thunder, Queenie, and Glory still trailed at the heels of the hunters, but Duckfoot was no longer present. Harky gulped, then used the thumb of his left hand to trace a circle on the palm of his right. Less than half a shake ago, Duckfoot had pushed his cold nose into that dangling palm and the circle Harky made there would certainly close him in and bring him back from wherever he had gone. At any rate, it should.

It didn't. Chills never born of the frosty night chased each other up and down Harky's spine. Mun claimed Duckfoot was half duck, Miss Cathby said that couldn't be, and Harky wavered between the two. He looked again, but only three hounds waded into the riffle to join the hunters gathering on the other side. Harky jumped.

If he had his mind on his work, he'd have crossed in perfect safety. But just as he made ready to strike a humpbacked boulder with the sole of his left foot, he miscalculated and struck with the heel. That broke his stride to such an extent that the next jump was six inches short, and instead of landing on a flat-topped

rock where he could have balanced, he came down in ten inches of ice water.

Only vast experience as a rock jumper prevented an allover bath; Harky threw himself forward to support his upper body on the flat rock. Then, since it was impossible to get his feet any wetter than they were, he waded the remaining distance.

"Really, Harold," said Melinda, who was dry as a shingle under the July sun, "you did that rather clumsily."

Harky made a mental note. It was easy to work the pith out of an elderberry stick. Small stones were plentiful. One of the latter, placed in the mouth and blown through the former, was never forgotten by anyone with whom it collided. The next time Harky attended Miss Cathby's school, Melinda was in for an unforgettable experience.

For the moment, since he could do nothing else about her, he could imagine she wasn't along. Harky turned his back on Melinda and addressed Mun:

"Duckfoot's gone."

"Danged if he ain't," said Mun, who noticed for the first time that they had only three of the four hounds with which they'd started. "When'd you note it?"

"Other side of the brook," Harky said in a hushed voice. "One minute his nose was in my hand, the next it wasn't. Do you figure he took wings and flew off?"

"It could," Mun began, but his about-to-be-expressed opinion that such a premise was wholly reasonable was interrupted by Melinda's, "Nonsense!"

Harky blazed, forgetting his sensible plan to ignore her. "Watta you know about it?"

"Now don't lose your temper, Harold," Melinda chided. "It's silly to suppose Duckfoot's half duck."

Harky drew his arm back. "Silly, huh? I've a good mind to—"

"Harky!" Mun roared. "Men don't hit wimmen!"

"Why don't they?" Harky growled.

"You're being childish, Harold," Melinda said sweetly. "Duckfoot's simply gone off somewhere. Perhaps he got tired and went home."

Harky tried to speak and succeeded only in choking. If it was insult to assert that Duckfoot could not be half duck, it was heresy even to imply that he left a hunt and went home because he was tired. Harky recovered his breath.

"Duckfoot didn't go home!" he screamed.

"Really, Harold," Melinda said, "it isn't necessary to make so much noise."

Harky was saved by the bell-like tones of a suddenly-tonguing hound.

"Queenie's got one," Raw Stanfield said.

"That's Glory tonguing," Melinda corrected. "She's pitched just a shade higher than Queenie."

"Now, Miss," Raw stuffed his tobacco into a corner of his mouth, "I know my own hound."

"There she is," Melinda said.

A second hound, almost exactly like the first but with subtle differences that were apparent when both tongued at the same time, began to sing. Raw Stanfield promptly swallowed his chew. Butt Johnson and Mun were momentarily too shocked to move.

Harky gasped. There was witchery present that had nothing to do with Duckfoot. Raw didn't know his own hound when he heard it, but Melinda did. Then Harky put the entire affair in its proper perspective. What else could you expect when you brought a girl on a coon hunt? Raw was just so shook up that he might be pardoned for failing to recognize Queenie even if he saw her.

"Le's git huntin'," Raw muttered.



Guiding himself by the blended voices of Queenie and Glory rising into the night air, and seeming to hover at treetop level for a moment before they faded, Harky began to run. The cold air whipped his face. The night whispered of all the marvels that have been since the beginning of time and will be until the end. For a moment, he even forgot Melinda.

This, he thought, was what coon hunting really meant. Listening to the hounds and trying to keep pace; knowing that somewhere far ahead, swift and silent-running Thunder was also on the coon's trail; drawing mental pictures of the coon and his scurry to be away; Thunder bursting upon and surprising the coon, who'd be listening to the tonguing hounds; the chorus as all hounds gathered at the tree. Harky laughed out loud.

Now he knew what a running deer knew, he told himself, and almost instantly the swiftest deer seemed unbearably slow. He was the wind itself, and he exulted in the notion that the other plodding humans, who would surely be running, would just as surely be far behind. They hadn't had his experience in running away from Mun.



Glory and Queenie, who seemed to run at the same pace even as they tongued in almost the same pitch, drew farther ahead but remained well within hearing. Harky frowned thoughtfully as he sped through the night. The way that coon was running, and the way the dogs became quiet at intervals, as though they'd been thrown off the scent, he had a feeling that they were on Old Joe himself.

When he climbed a knoll and was able to hear nothing, he no longer doubted. Queenie and Glory were casting for the trail, and Old Joe was the only coon that could keep Queenie puzzled this long. Harky halted.

"Old Joe sure enough," he said out loud.

"Don't you think," Melinda asked calmly, "that we should go directly to his big sycamore?"

Harky jumped like a shot-stung fox. He blinked, not daring to believe she'd kept pace with him but unable to discredit his own eyes. Suddenly he felt far more the plodding turtle than the speeding deer, but he extricated himself as neatly as Old Joe foiled a second-rate hound.

"If I hadn't slowed down on accounta you," he said belligerently, "I'd of been at Old Joe's tree by now."

Melinda said meekly, "I know you were running slowly, Harold, but you needn't have. I could have gone much faster."

Harky gulped and felt his way. Melinda, he decided, must have brought her rabbit's foot with her and probably she'd rolled in a whole field of four-leaf clovers. Beyond any doubt, she'd also observed the phases of the moon and conducted herself accordingly.

"What do you know about Old Joe's sycamore?" he asked.

"What everyone knows," she said casually. "Old Joe runs to it every time he's hard pressed by hounds."

"He's probably lost a thousand hounds and two thousand hunters at that tree," Harky said.

"Pooh!" Melinda scoffed. "There haven't been a thousand hounds and two thousand hunters in the Creeping Hills during the past hundred years!"

"Old Joe's been prowling that long," Harky declared.

"Rubbish!" said Melinda. "He's just a big raccoon who's smart enough to climb a tree that can't be felled

or climbed. Even my own father believes he's been here forever, but you should know better. You've been taught by Miss Cathby."

Harky sneered, "Miss Cathby don't know nothin' about nothin'."

"Harold!" Melinda was properly shocked. "Don't you dare talk that way about Miss Cathby!"

"Ha!" Harky crowed. "I'll—"

The battle that might have resulted from this impact of Miss Cathby's education with the lore and legend of the Creeping Hills was forestalled when two hounds began to bay at Old Joe's sycamore. They were Thunder and Duckfoot.



THE FALL OF MUN

Old Joe left his daytime den, a burrow beneath a humpbacked boulder, half an hour after nightfall. He paused for a moment in the exit he'd chosen—one of three leading from the den—to twitch his whiskers and wriggle his nose. As usual, he wanted to determine what was in the wind before going down it. There was nothing, or at least nothing that called for more than ordinary caution. Old Joe chattered contentedly to himself.

Except for the one bad night, when everything went wrong and he'd finally been chased up his big sycamore by Duckfoot, he had enjoyed a successful season indeed. Corn had been plentiful, crawfish and mussels abundant, poultry careless, and enemies few. Some of those that had threatened would have been considerably better off if they hadn't.

Notable among them was Pine Heglin's fighting dog. Smarting from that unexpected encounter, when he'd returned to steal one of Pine's guinea hens and been so desperately pressed, Old Joe had chosen his time and gone back to Pine's house one night. The dog rushed. Old Joe scooted away. After a pathetically short chase, the dog bayed him.

The dog, however, lacked a full appreciation of the properties of bees, and Old Joe had let himself be cornered on one of Pine's beehives. The dog closed, the hive tipped over, and while Old Joe scurried happily onward, the dog received a short but intensive education in the folly of tipping beehives. Bees did not bother Old Joe. Even in summer his fur was long enough to protect him, and whenever he felt like it, which was whenever he wanted some honey, he raided beehives.

Now, with a blanket of fat beneath his glossy fur, he was all ready for the wintry blasts that would send him to bed in his big sycamore. Between now and that uncertain period when bitter winds blew, there was considerable living to be done.

On this particular night the first order of living involved something to eat, and Old Joe was in a mood for beechnuts. They were so tiny that Melinda Garson might have held fifty in the palm of her hand and still lacked a handful. But they were delicious, and along with acorns they spread a bountiful autumn table because they existed by the billion. When frost opened the pods and wind rattled the branches of beech trees, the sound of beechnuts pattering into dry leaves was not unlike the sound of a violent rain.

Having chosen his menu for the night, Old Joe had only to decide which of many beech groves offered the easiest pickings with the greatest advantage to himself. He finally selected the one bordering Willow Brook and just opposite Mun Munde's farm.

There were various reasons for his choice. First, the grove was in a sheltered area, which meant that its pods ripened later than those that were exposed to first frosts and heavy winds. Therefore it would not be so thoroughly picked over, and would still be dropping nuts in abundance. Second, this grove always produced a lush crop.

But Old Joe's most compelling reason for his choice was that the grove was infested with squirrels, who had been frantically gathering the beechnuts ever since they began to drop, and storing them in hollow logs, stumps, crevices, and any other place available. It was no part of Old Joe's plan to scrape in the leaves and gather his dinner nut by nut when a little investigation was certain to uncover a cache that

might contain from half a pint to a couple of quarts of beechnuts, already gathered by some industrious squirrel.

His campaign mapped, Old Joe proceeded to execute it.

The autumn night posed its usual charms, but hunger took precedence over esthetic inclinations. Old Joe did not linger to watch starlight glinting on a pond, investigate fox fire in a swamp, or even to retrieve a nine-inch trout, wounded in combat with some bigger fish, that was feebly wriggling in the shallows. The trout was a delicacy, but so were beechnuts. Let lesser coons settle for less than they wanted.

Coming to a long pool, Old Joe plunged in and swam its length. Thereafter he kept to Willow Brook. He'd seen no evidence of hunters and had no reason to suppose that any were abroad tonight. Though keeping to the water was an amateur's trick—one any good coon hound could decipher without difficulty—leaving this break in his scent was one of Old Joe's numerous forms of insurance. If a hound should get on him, Old Joe would at least have time to plan some really intricate strategy.

Dripping wet, but not even slightly chilled, and with every sense and nerve brought wonderfully alive by his journey through ice water, Old Joe climbed the bank into the beech grove. He paused to reconnoiter.

The grove, composed entirely of massive beech trees, bordered Willow Brook for about a quarter of a mile and gave way to spindly aspens on either side. The best beechnut hunting lay in the most sheltered area near Willow Brook, but there were other considerations.

There had still been no evidence of hunters. Old Joe, however, could not afford to ignore the possibility that some might venture forth. He knew perfectly well that the instant he left Willow Brook he had started laying a hot trail that any mediocre hound could follow. While mediocre hounds were no cause for concern, they were as scarce in the Creeping Hills as apples on a beech tree.

Old Joe must plan accordingly, and his immediate plans centered about a lazy slough that lay a short distance back in the beeches and had its source in a lazy runlet that trickled down an upheaval of massive rocks. He made his way toward that slough.

The grove already had an ample quota of beechnut harvesters of high and low degree. Old Joe circled a snuffling black bear that squatted on its rump, raked dead leaves with both front paws and gusty abandon, and bent its head to lick up beechnuts along with shredded leaves, dirt, and anything else that happened to be in the way. Farther on was a buck with massive antlers, then a whole herd of deer. A family of skunks had come to share the bounty, and a little coon that hadn't yet learned the proper technique of harvesting beechnuts made up in enthusiasm what he lacked in skill.

Old Joe bothered none. The bear and the deer were too big, the skunks too pungent, and he couldn't be bothered with callow little coons. Anyhow, there was plenty for all. Old Joe came to the slough and sat up to turn his pointed nose to each of the four winds. Detecting nothing that might interrupt his dinner, he fell to hunting.

Towering high over the slough, touching branches across it as though they were shaking hands, the beech twigs rattled dryly as the wind shook them and beechnuts pattered in the leaves or made tiny splashes in the slough. Old Joe, with no disdain for the many nuts he might have gathered but a hearty contempt for the work involved in gathering them, went directly to a moss-grown stump.

He sniffed it. Then he nibbled it. Finally, half sitting and half crouching, he felt all around it with both front paws. The moss was soft and the stump rotting, but nowhere was there a crack or crevice in which a

provident squirrel, anticipating the winter to come, might have concealed any beechnuts.

In no way disheartened, Old Joe went from the stump to a gray-backed boulder and explored that. Again he failed. On his third try, fortune smiled.

At the very edge of the slough, possibly because its deep roots were imbedded in constantly-wet earth, a great beech had been partially toppled by a high wind that screamed through the grove. One massive root lay on top of the ground and snaked along it for three feet before probing downward again.

Beneath this root Old Joe found the hidden treasure trove of what must have been the most industrious squirrel in the Creeping Hills. At least a gallon of beechnuts were packed in so tightly that it was necessary to pry the first ones loose. Old Joe settled himself to partaking of the squirrel's hoard.

Opportunity, which knocked often but rarely in such lavish measure, had better be welcomed instantly and swiftly or there was some danger that the squirrel might yet partake of some of the nuts. But though Old Joe was industrious, it just wasn't his night.

He'd eaten about a fifth of the squirrel's cache when the bear he'd previously circled raced to the slough, splashed across it, and with a great rattling of stones and rustling of leaves ran up the hill and disappeared in the night.

Old Joe came instantly to attention. The bear, a big one, was frightened. Big bears did not easily take fright, therefore something was now in the beech grove that had not been present when Old Joe arrived.

A moment later, Duckfoot rushed him. Keener scented than any of the other three hounds, Duckfoot had been the first to discover that a coon was indeed in the beech grove and he acted accordingly.

Old Joe rolled down the bank into the slough and started swimming. On such dismal occasions his mind was automatically made up, so that there was no need to linger and determine a proper course of action. He swam fast, but at the same time he exercised discretion. A terrified young coon would have splashed and rippled the water, and thus marked his path of flight for any hound that was not blind. With everything except his eyes and the very tip of his nose submerged, Old Joe swam silently.

It had been a case of mutual recognition and Old Joe never deluded himself. With Duckfoot again on his trail, the only safe tree was his big sycamore. Emerging at the head of the slough, Old Joe ran up the trickle that fed it, scrambled down the far side of the upended rocks, raced through a swamp, and took the shortest possible route back to Willow Brook. He'd just reached and jumped into the brook when any lingering plans he might have had for foiling Duckfoot were put firmly behind him.

Back where the hunters were gathered, Glory and Queenie began to sing. Though he'd never been run by Glory, Queenie was the slower and noisier half of a formidable team, and Thunder would be along presently. There was no time to waste. Swimming the pools and running the riffles, and knowing that neither these nor any other tactics would baffle Thunder and Duckfoot for very long, Old Joe sacrificed strategy for haste. Panting like a winded dog, he sprang into the slough at the base of his sycamore, swam it, and climbed.

He tumbled into his den, sighed gratefully, and waited for whatever came next.

It was Duckfoot and Thunder. Running neck and neck, the inexperienced puppy and the tested veteran reached the sycamore at exactly the same second and wakened the night with their voices.

Old Joe stirred uneasily. Though this was not the first time he had been trailed to his magic sycamore, never before had he been so hotly pursued. He was on the point of leaving his den, climbing farther up the sycamore and escaping through his tunnel, but Old Joe restrained himself. He'd always been safe here and he was too smart to panic. Besides, if the worst came to the worst, he could still use the tunnel.

Thunder and Duckfoot, blessed with voices that would have awakened Rip Van Winkle, were presently joined by Queenie and Glory. Old Joe scratched his left ear with his right hind paw, a sure sign of nervousness. On various occasions one hound had trailed him to the sycamore, a few times there'd been two, but never before had there been four hounds at the sycamore's base.

Again Old Joe was tempted to resort to his tunnel. Again he refrained and waited for the hunters.

Harky and Melinda came. Old Joe wriggled his black nose. Harky, usually the first to arrive at any tree when a coon was up, he knew well. His acquaintance with Melinda was only casual. He heard the pair talking.

"When he wants to get out," Harky avowed seriously, "some say he climbs out on a limb and drops back into the slough. On t'other hand, some say he grows wings and takes off like a bird."

"How silly!" Melinda exclaimed.

"Yeah?" Harky asked truculently. "Watta you know about it?"

Melinda declared scornfully, "Enough not to believe such nonsense! He has a den somewhere in that sycamore and he's in it right now! The only reason nobody ever found it is because everyone's been too lazy to climb!"

"And how you gonna climb?" Harky demanded.

"Just cut one of these smaller trees, brace it against the crotch of the sycamore, and shinny up it," Melinda asserted.

Harky said nothing because this purely revolutionary scheme left him speechless.

Old Joe's uneasiness mounted. Though he understood no part of the conversation, he had no doubt that a new force had invaded coon hunts. The men who'd always come to his magic sycamore had been happy just to get there, proud of hounds able to track Old Joe so far, and amenable to the idea that neither hounds nor humans could further cope with a coon that was part witch.

Old Joe didn't know what she was, but Melinda was definitely not a man. The rest of the hunters arrived, but before they could begin their ritual that had to do with the invincibility of Old Joe, Melinda threw her bombshell.

"I was telling Harold," she said brightly, "that Old Joe has a den somewhere in this big sycamore. Why don't we fell a smaller tree, brace it against the sycamore, and shinny up to find out?"

"By gum!" Mun said.

As soon as the three men recovered from this flagrant violation of everything right and proper, Old Joe heard the sound of an axe. A tree was toppled, trimmed, and leaned against the sycamore.

"Let me go up, Pa," Harky said.

Mun asserted, "If anybody's goin' to have fust look at Old Joe's den, it'll be me."

Mun and Old Joe started to climb.

"Thar he scampers!" yelled Raw Stanfield.

Old Joe continued to scamper, paying no attention whatever to the fact that, while excitement reigned, Mun fell out of the sycamore. Old Joe climbed out on the limb and tumbled into his tunnel.

Duckfoot, who'd noted the obvious escape route but was just a split second too late, tumbled in behind him. Both the tunnel and Old Joe, however, were low-built. Duckfoot, considerably farther from the ground, had to crawl where Old Joe ran.

The big coon ran out of the tunnel and into the swamp with a safe enough lead. But the next morning's sun was two hours high before he managed to shake Duckfoot from his trail.





IMPASSE

Harky Mundeel shoved his fork deeply into the hay. He twisted the tines to gather the biggest possible load; as long as a man had to pitch fool hay he might as well do so in as few forkfuls as possible and get the misery over with. Then he tumbled his load down the chute into the cow stable and leaned on his fork to indulge in some sadly-needed self-criticism.

Mun sat in the house with a broken leg and that was a bad thing, though on the whole it was easier to endure than Mun's ruptured temper. However, Mun's temper was an abstract affair that might erupt at any moment, while a broken leg was distinctly concrete. Harky told himself that anything so indisputably tangible should never beset Mun.

Still, hadn't it been wrought by providence? If Mun had not tried to climb Old Joe's sycamore, he wouldn't have fallen. If he had not fallen, he wouldn't have a broken leg. He should not have such a thing, but he had it, and by all the rules of logic Harky should have achieved the ultimate ideal.

With his leg splinted and bound, Mun's current living space was restricted to the chair upon which he sat all day long and the cot upon which he lay all night long. Harky had been prudent enough to remove from the sweep of his father's arms all sticks of fire wood, dishes, hatchets, knives, and anything else Mun might throw. Let Mun roar as he might (and did, whenever Harky was in the house), roaring broke no bones. For the first time since he could remember, Harky had no need to outwit his father in order to do as he pleased.

Of course there were some tasks one did not avoid. Livestock was incapable of caring for itself, and Harky was too close to the earth to let any living creature suffer for lack of attention. It was far better to butcher it, an idea Harky had played with, but no matter how long the winter might be, two people couldn't eat six cows, four pigs, and sixty-nine chickens. There'd always be the horses left anyway.

Grimacing as he did so, Harky pitched another forkful of hay down the chute. Livestock should really be taught to eat coon meat so a man, with complete freedom of conscience, might spend all his time hunting coons. Maybe, if cows ate something besides hay, they wouldn't be such fools.

Harky thought suddenly of the last time he'd attended Miss Cathby's school, and shuddered.

One of Miss Cathby's unswerving goals embraced assailing the minds of her students with literature other than that which their fathers might exchange behind the barn, and to that end there was a daily reading. Most of it was not unendurable; all Harky had to do was think about coons and look as though he were paying attention. On this particular day, however, he had been unable to think about coons and was forced to listen while Miss Cathby read a poem all about new-mown hay on a bright June day.

Harky shuddered again and pitched furiously until he had all the cows could eat. He jammed his fork into the hay and scrambled down the ladder to the barn floor.

Formal education could mean the ruin of a man if he didn't watch out. Miss Cathby had enthused about the poem and its author, but in the first place, hay was not harvested in June. It wasn't even ripe until July, and whoever wrote so touchingly of new-mown hay had never stood under a furnace-hot sun and pitched any.

Duckfoot, who had been waiting in the chaff on the barn floor, sidled up to Harky. Harky let his dangling

hand caress the big dog's ears, and he tried to do some thinking about Duckfoot. But thoughts of hay just naturally started him to thinking about corn, and the Munde corn was still in the field where it had been shocked.

Therein lay a major point of friction between Mun, who demanded that it be brought in, and Harky, who wouldn't bring it. He'd long had his own sensible ideas concerning the proper way to run a farm, and bringing in shocked corn did not come under the category of sense.

There were arguments pro and con, and pro was summed up by the fact that if it was not properly harvested, there'd be neither corn for winter feeding of pigs and chickens nor husks for bedding. This argument, Harky admitted, was not without a certain validity. But opposed to it was such an overwhelming weight of evidence that any value it might possess was puny indeed.

Though unattended corn could not suffer as neglected animals would, Harky would endure untold agony if he first had to haul it to the barn and then husk it. If pigs and chickens had nothing to eat they could always be eaten, thus solving the twin problems of caring for them and satisfying one's own appetite. Corn in the shock lured coons, but not even Old Joe could break into a corn crib.

The corn would stay in the shock.

It was, or should have been, a cause for leaping in the air, clicking one's heels together, and whooping with joy. Unafflicted by any such desire, Harky stirred nervously and wondered at himself. There was no special age at which a man started slipping, and if he found no delight in ignoring tasks Mun ordered him to do, he was already far gone.

Suddenly it occurred to Harky that there had been no particular pleasure since that night, a week ago, when they had Old Joe up and Mun fell out of the sycamore. Harky hadn't even wanted to go coon hunting, and then he knew.

Knowing, he trembled. Coon hunters of the Creeping Hills had flourished since the first hunter brought the first hound because they did things properly, and the proper doing was inseparably bound to a proper respect for the art they pursued. There just hadn't been any trouble.

Until the first time a girl horned in.

Raw Stanfield and Butt Johnson had helped carry Mun home. Then, understanding the fearful consequences of Melinda's heresy, they'd summoned Queenie and Thunder to heel and hadn't been seen since.

Shaken from the tips of his toes to the ends of his shaggy hair, Harky needed another fifteen minutes before he could muster strength to start milking. Melinda had put a hex on all of them that night she stood beneath Old Joe's sycamore, with Old Joe up, and declared so loftily that the sycamore was not a magic tree but merely one that hunters were too lazy to chop or climb, and that Old Joe was nothing more than a big, wise, and rather interesting coon.

That accounted for the broken leg of Mun, the aloofness of Raw Stanfield and Butt Johnson, and the unhappiness of Harky. He sat down to milk, but he was still so jarred by the dreadful tidings he'd just imparted to himself that when Old Brindle kicked the pail over Harky didn't even threaten her with a club. Affairs were already in a state so hopeless that nothing Old Brindle did could complicate them further. Not even if she kicked Harky's brains out.

He finished the milking and the other chores and latched the barn door. Duckfoot trailed behind him as he walked toward the house, but Harky did not have even his usual friendly pat for the hound's head when they came to the porch. Duckfoot, who'd shed most of his puppyish ways, crawled disconsolately into his sleeping box.

Gloom remained Harky's companion. Fifty-one years ago, or approximately at the beginning of time, his great-grandfather had settled this very farm. There'd been Mundees on it since, and hounds of the lineage of Precious Sue, and all of them had hunted Old Joe. Now the spell was broken because a mere girl, who had been taught by Miss Cathby, who didn't know anything about anything, had considered it right to trifle with spells.

Harky recalled the night Melinda had brought Glory to the coon hunt. He had, he remembered, hoped Melinda would fall in the mud and had promised to stamp on her head if she did. He could not help thinking that that had been a flash of purest insight, and that all would now be favorable if Melinda had fallen in the mud and had her head stamped on.

Harky turned the door knob and made his decision as he did so. The new and radical, as represented by Melinda and Miss Cathby, must go. The old and steadfast, as embodied in the immortality of Old Joe and the probability that Duckfoot's father was really a duck, must be restored to the pedestal from which it had toppled. But Harky needed Mun's advice, and he was so intent on the problem at hand that he only half heard his father's greeting.

"So ya finally come back, eh? Of all the blasted, lazy, pokey, turtle-brained warts on the face of creation, I jest dunno of a one wust than you!"

Harky said, "Yes, Pa."

Startled, but too much under the influence of his own momentum to stop suddenly, Mun demanded, "Didja git the corn in?"

"No, Pa."

The fires in Mun's brain died. Harky, who should have been sassing him back, was meekly turning the other cheek. Despite Mun's frequently and violently expressed opinions concerning the all-around worthlessness of his offspring, Harky was his son and the sole hope of the coon-hunting branch of the clan Munde.

"Ya sick, Harky?" Mun asked suspiciously.

"No, Pa."

"Then what is chawin' on ya?"

"Tell me again when my great-grandpappy come here," Harky requested.

Mun said, "Nigh onto fifty-two years past."

"That's a heap o' time, ain't it?" Harky asked.

"A smart heap o' time," Mun declared proudly. "Not many famblys knows as much about themselves as us Munde.

"You sure," Harky went on, "that Sue come to no good end on account she run in the dark o' the moon?"

Mun shrugged. "What else?"

"And Duckfoot's pappy was a duck?"

Mun looked puzzled. "Think I'd lie, Harky?"

"No, Pa," Harky said hastily. "Just tell me again that all us Mundees been on the trail of Old Joe."

"How kin ya ponder?" Mun asked. "My grandpappy told my pappy, who told me, who told you, that Old Joe's been hunted by every Mundeec."

"What do you think of Old Joe's big sycamore?" Harky questioned.

"It's a witch tree," Mun said seriously. "I ain't rightly been able to figger if'n Old Joe takes wings an' flies off it or if'n he does jump in the slough. But I'm sure that if'n Old Joe gits in his witch tree naught can harm him."

"Ha!" Harky exclaimed. "Now we know!"

"Know what?" Again Mun was puzzled.

"All," Harky declared. "Mellie Garson gets mule-kicked; Melinda brings Glory to horn in on our hunt; we get Old Joe up in his sycamore; Melinda says it ain't no witch tree and Old Joe's naught but a big coon; you believe her and try to climb; you bust your leg; Raw and Butt don't want no more part of us—and," Harky wailed, "I can't even take pleasure on account you can't make me fetch the corn in!"

"By gum!" Mun said, "you got it!"

"Sure I got it," Harky asserted. "Why'd you let Melinda horn in on our coon hunt, Pa?"

"I don't rightly know," Mun admitted. "I wa'n't of no mind to have her, an' I know Raw'n Butt wa'n't. But she was of a mind to go, an' gol ding it, when a woman's of a mind to do somethin', they do it!"

"I would of stomped on her head if she'd fell in the mud," Harky assured his father.

"I know," Mun meditated, "an' it wa'n't a poor notion. But, gol ding it, men just don't mistreat wimmen."

"I still don't know why," said Harky.

"Nor I," Mun admitted. "They jest don't an' that's all. Your ma, she didn't weigh mor'n half what I do, but she's the only mortal critter ever made me take to the woods."

"Are women ornery all the time?" Harky questioned.

"'Bout half," Mun said. "Rest o' the time, well, they're wimmen."

"What else do you know about 'em, Pa?"

"Durn little," Mun confessed. "What ya drivin' at anyhow, Harky?"

"Melinda put a spell on us," Harky said. "But it ain't all her doing. Miss Cathby showed her how."

"I never thought of that," said Mun. "Never ag'in do I make ya go to school, Harky."

"Good," Harky said. "But I got to get that spell off."

"How do ya aim to go about it?" Mun questioned.

"I'll ask Melinda to fetch Glory on another coon hunt," Harky declared. "We'll run Old Joe up his sycamore again. Then I'll climb the tree and make her climb with me. She'll eat mud when she finds out there ain't no den."

"Harky!" Mun said joyously. "Your great-grandpappy would be right proud of the way you talk!"



HARKY'S PLOT

Mellie Garson, still immobilized by the mule kick, was aware of the stain that afflicted his immortal soul. But he was not completely repentant. Nothing could be worse than another day on the pickle keg.

Listlessly Mellie caught up a handful of pebbles and shied them one by one at a knothole in the woodshed wall. He shook his head and uttered a despairing moan. Tossing pebbles at the knothole was the only game he'd invented to beguile the passing hours, and at first it had been interesting because he made a bull's-eye only about one time in twenty. Now it seemed that every pebble he tossed sailed through the knothole as naturally as a trout swims up riffles.

Mellie contemplated scooping up more pebbles for more sharpshooting, but where was the fun when he just couldn't miss? Glumly he reviewed the sin for which he must one day answer.

He should not, he told himself, ever have sent Melinda to take Glory on the coon hunt. But how was he to know they'd get Old Joe up in his magic sycamore? Could he possibly have had forewarning of the fact that Melinda would not only question the witchery of Old Joe and his magic tree, but infect the minds of her male companions with her own skepticism? Could anyone guess that the hallowed traditions of the Creeping Hills coon hunters would topple simply because a girl took part in a coon hunt?

Mellie shook his head sadly. Melinda, not exactly a woman, was not exactly a girl either. She was, Mellie told himself, old enough to cast the monkey wrench that usually lands in the gears whenever women intrude on affairs that by every law of God and nature belong exclusively to men.

The wreckage had been fearful indeed; Mun Munde laid up with a broken leg; Raw Stanfield and Butt Johnson afraid to show their faces on the lower reaches of Willow Brook; Harky Munde mad as a trapped mink; and Melinda explaining blithely that hunting raccoons was indeed good sport.

Mellie buried his face in his hands and shook with anguish. He was not, he told himself honestly, as ashamed as he should be because he had thrown such a destructive bomb among the Creeping Hills coon hunters. But that a Garson, even a female Garson, should refer to the art of coon hunting as mere "good sport" shook the very foundations of everything in which Mellie had faith.

Glory, who had been dozing in the sun, rose and prowled restlessly over to snuffle at the woodpile. Mellie regarded her with an experienced eye.

Melinda might lack a true appreciation of coon hunting, but she'd certainly given him a thorough rundown on Glory. A slow starter and slow hunter, Melinda had said, and she tongued on the trail. But she was steady as a church and true as a homing pigeon. She was every bit as good as Queenie, and with a little experience she'd be better. A year from now, any coon Glory got on would be treed or run to earth.

Mellie had a sudden, uncomfortable feeling that he himself could not have found out so much about Glory in just one hunt. Or if he had, he'd be inclined to doubt until Glory proved herself. But he'd accepted Melinda's evaluation without the slightest question, and now as he looked at Glory he knew a rising uneasiness.

A good thing was never to be taken for granted, and there was much that could happen to any hunting hound; Mellie had only to remember Precious Sue. Though he fervently hoped she wouldn't, Glory might

go the same way, and where would he find another coon hound of equal quality? There was only one source.

However, there was a great deal involved. It was blasphemy even to think in terms of ordinary coon dogs when Glory was simultaneously in mind. There were only two hounds on Willow Brook worthy of her, Thunder and Duckfoot. Things being as they were, even if all else were equal, it was unlikely that Butt Johnson would bring either his hound or himself within nine miles of the Garsons, or anything that belonged to the Garsons.

About to catch up another handful of pebbles, Mellie grimaced and refrained. He did not know how many pebbles he'd flicked from the upended pickle keg through the knothole and into the woodshed, but offhand he guessed there were at least four bushels, and he didn't even want to think about another one. Nor had he much of anything else to occupy his thoughts. His daughters, with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of efficiency, had all the farm tasks well in hand.

Mellie resumed his study of Glory, who had lain down in the sun but was not sleeping, and wondered if he should keep her tied up. She might go wandering, and there was no assurance that she'd be as lucky as Precious Sue. As everyone knew, the woods were just filled with all sorts of witches, and many of them were all bad.

Glumly Mellie pondered the probability that she'd break loose and go wandering even if he tied her (would anything ever go right for him?) when Glory sat up, tilted her head, and voiced a warning wail. A moment later, Harky Mundeel appeared.

Mellie sat still, doing his best to conceal his amazement, for he'd have been no more completely astounded if Old Joe himself had appeared with the ghost of Precious Sue in hot pursuit. Obviously Harky was not seeking a fight, for he carried no fighting tools. But he certainly was not coming in peace; after Mellie's foul trick, the Mundeels would never make peace with the Garsons. On the point of demanding that Harky state his business and be on his way, Harky forestalled him with:

"I come to ask can Melinda fetch Glory on another coon hunt tonight?"

For a moment Mellie felt as though he'd again been mule-kicked, this time squarely between the eyes. He blinked and recovered.

"I thought," he heard himself saying, "that you come to ask kin Melinda fetch Glory on another coon hunt tonight?"

"I did," Harky asserted.

A sudden suspicion pricked Mellie's mind. Boys were boys and girls were girls, and all things considered it was a very pleasing arrangement, and there was no harm whatever in a bit of smooching. But how come Harky Mundeel, otherwise so very sensible, thought he could successfully blend that with a coon hunt? Or did he?

"You got notions 'bout that girl child of mine?" he demanded.

"You bet!" Harky assured him.

"Well, I don't know as I have any real objections. Melinda's a mite young, but you're a mite young yourself to be huntin' a wife."

"Wife!" Harky gasped. "You think I been moonstruck?"

"You talk like you been," Mellie growled. "A man has to be 'fore he'll let himself in for all what can happen when he *asks* a woman to go coon huntin'. Who ya aim to take along outside o' Melinda an' Glory?"

"Me an' Duckfoot," Harky stated.

"But you ain't got no ideas 'bout Melinda?" Mellie pursued.

"You're darn' whistlin' right I got ideas!" Harky said. "I've had 'em ever since the night everything got smashed to bits!"

"I know," Mellie said gloomily.

"I can't even take no pleasure on account Pa can't make me fetch the corn in and husk it," Harky continued.

"I know," said Mellie, and he shrugged helplessly. "Many's the time I been tempted to leave mine out, but with fourteen wimmen folk, a body's got less chanst than you stand with your Pa."

"Could be you're right," Harky said reflectively. "I guess there's times when a man like you just can't help himself, and that's why you sent Melinda on the coon hunt."

"I could of helped myself," Mellie corrected. "I could of told Melinda to stay home an' she'd of stayed. But I didn't an' she didn't."

"Why'd you send her?" Harky asked.

"Pure hellishness," said Mellie. "I was mule-kicked an' couldn't go coon huntin' so I figgered I'd ruin it for everybody else."

"You sure enough did," Harky told him. "Pa's got a busted leg, Raw and Butt are staying near enough the woods so they can duck into 'em, and us coon hunters are just going to sink right where we are without we do something."

"What ya aim to do, Harky?"

"I got to take Melinda out and I'll bring her back. We have to run Old Joe up his big sycamore and I got to show Melinda that there ain't any den there for him to hide in."

"It's a right big order," Mellie said.

"But the only chance any of us got," Harky pointed out. "That Miss Cathby, she come into the hills and tried to teach that Old Joe ain't nothing but a big old coon. The rest, she says, is a lot of foolishness, too. If we don't put a finish to that sort of thing once and for all, even us men will be sitting around gathering our lore out of books 'stead of coon hunts."

Mellie shuddered at a prospect so horrible. There was a brief silence, and Harky asked, "Can Melinda fetch Glory tonight?"

Mellie said seriously, "Maybe you ain't been moonstruck in one way, but you sure have been in another. You ever try tellin' a woman what to do?"

"No," Harky conceded, "but I'd like to."

"Me too," Mellie said sadly, "but I know better. Melinda kin go if she wants to, an' I kind of think she will on account she likes coon huntin'. But—"

"But what?" Harky asked.

"But nothin'," Mellie said.

About to fill Harky's understanding ear with his recent mental turmoil, and how that was responsible for his decision to keep Glory tied, Mellie wisely said nothing. Somehow or other he'd got just what he wanted anyhow, and Glory would be running with Duckfoot. Only fools meddled with affairs that were already perfect.

"Good enough," said Harky. "I'll wait 'til Melinda comes."

In due course, another day at Miss Cathby's school behind them, Melinda and Mary danced into the yard. Mary, who not only thought Harky a roughneck but said so loudly, frequently, and publicly, stuck her tongue out at him and ran into the house. Melinda, met and accompanied by an ecstatic Glory, came to where her father and Harky waited.

"You must have your corn in, Harold," she said sweetly.

"How come you ask that?" Harky demanded.

"If you didn't, you'd never be wasting daylight hours just talking."

"Corn ain't in and it ain't gonna be," Harky stated. "It ain't none of your mix if 'tis or not. What I come to ask is, will you bring Glory and come hunting tonight?"

"Can I, Pa?" Melinda breathed.

"If you've a mind to," Mellie said.

"Oh, Pa!"

She kissed him, assured Harky that she would be there with Glory at nightfall, and ran into the house. Mellie turned glowing eyes on Harky.

"You do git yourself a wife come two-three years, don't cuss your girl children. Didja see her kiss me?"

"Fagh!" said Harky.



Duckfoot, sitting on the Munde porch, was hopefully sniffing the pork chops Harky was frying inside. Knowing that in the fullness of time he would be gnawing the bones, Duckfoot licked his pendulous jowls in happy anticipation and blew through his nose.

If he thought of himself at all, which he seldom did, it was never to wonder what he was or why he had been created. He was a hound, he had been created to hunt coons, and that's all Duckfoot had to know.

He could not possibly understand that he was a canine genius, and he wouldn't have cared if he had. The blood of Precious Sue mingled with that of Rafe Bradley's huge hound in Duckfoot, and he had inherited the best of both plus something more. He was born with a sense of smell and an ability to stick to a trail that is rare in even the best of experienced hounds.

The extra something consisted of a talent to out-think and outguess the quarry he was running. He'd been a mere pup the night Old Joe came raiding, but he'd experienced little difficulty in tracking Old Joe to his magic sycamore and he'd learned since.

The second time they ran Old Joe, Duckfoot had paced the renowned Thunder and arrived at the sycamore with his far more experienced hunting companion. He'd known perfectly well that Old Joe was in the den, for he could smell him there.

With a coon up, and for as long as the coon remained up, Duckfoot was satisfied to run true to form and bay the tree. Sooner or later his master would hear him tonguing and arrive to take charge. But Duckfoot had no intention of letting any coon, treed or not, get the upper hand and he called on his inborn hunting sense to make sure they never did.

Even Thunder considered his whole duty discharged if he either caught his coon on the ground or treed him and bayed the tree. Duckfoot went beyond that to a complete grasp of any given situation. He had known even as he supported Thunder's voice with his own that Old Joe might try to escape and that the one logical escape route was farther up the sycamore and into the tunnel.

The instant Old Joe left his den, Duckfoot raced for the ledge. Only the cramped tunnel prevented his overtaking Old Joe, and there'd been a long, hard chase after the big coon emerged into the swamp. Old Joe had finally escaped by entering a beaver pond, diving, evicting the rightful tenants from their domed house, and waiting it out.

It was a maneuver that Duckfoot had yet to learn; all he was sure of was that beaver appeared but the coon disappeared. Duckfoot, however, had learned exactly what to do should Old Joe again enter his den in the sycamore and be forced out of it. Rather than go to the tunnel's entrance, he'd go to its mouth and wait for his quarry to come out.

Thus Old Joe entered a wrong phase of his own special moon. If he treed in the sycamore and stayed there, his den would surely be discovered. If he left, Duckfoot would catch him at the swamp.

Two seconds before his supper was ready, Duckfoot winded Old Joe.

The old raider was down in the corn, making ready to rip a shock apart and help himself to the ears, when Duckfoot rushed. With a coon scented, he forgot even the prospect of pork chop bones.

The trail led to Willow Brook. Ranging upstream, Duckfoot found where the big coon had emerged on the far bank and tried to lose his scent in a slough. Duckfoot solved that one. Running like a greyhound when he was on scent and working methodically when he was not, he went on.

Presently, far behind, he heard Glory begin to tongue. Duckfoot set himself to working out another twist in Old Joe's trail.

Beyond any doubt, it would lead to the magic sycamore.



AUTUMN NIGHT

Old Joe scrambled up his magic sycamore and tumbled into his den. Five and a half minutes later Duckfoot arrived to waken the night with his roaring. Old Joe crouched nervously in the leaf-filled den, knowing that at last he had been careless. There were various reasons for his lapse in good judgment, of which the night itself was most important. It was mild autumn, just such a night as sometimes lingered through mid-December and sometimes changed in a few hours to cold winter that brought snow and left Willow Brook ice-locked for another season.

When he started out Old Joe had an uneasy feeling that this was to be, and that tonight would be his last to prowl the Creeping Hills until the February thaw. Uncertainty as to just how far he might venture from a safe den contributed to his carelessness, and he raided Mun Munde's because his was the only corn left standing in the shock.

So doing he had scarcely a thought for Duckfoot. He chattered anxiously as he lay in the den and listened to the big hound roar.

The magic sycamore was a witch tree no longer; its spell had been broken the last time Old Joe treed in it and Mun tried to climb. The big coon did not know that Mun had fallen and broken a leg in falling; he'd have felt more cheerful if he had been aware of an occurrence so delightful. He was certain that he could now be chased out of this den and equally sure that Duckfoot knew his avenue of escape.

But even though Old Joe felt his mistake, he did not feel that it was necessarily a fatal one.

He decided to remain where he was and await developments. If the hunters flushed him from his den, he'd try to escape through his tunnel. Should Duckfoot be waiting there, Old Joe's only choice would be to try fighting off the hound until he was in the tunnel. Then he could run away.

Anything else that might arise, he'd deal with when the time came.

Glory arrived to add her shrill voice to Duckfoot's bass roars, and then Harky and Melinda came. Old Joe climbed the mouth of his den and poised there; if it was necessary to run up the sycamore and drop into his tunnel, every split second would be precious.

He saw the glow of the lantern. He heard the measured blows of an axe followed by the sound of a smaller tree toppling. The big coon waited until it was trimmed and propped against the sycamore, then he could wait no longer.

He left his den fast, scampered up the sycamore, and climbed out on the limb that overhung the tunnel's entrance. Old Joe continued to move fast. Though he was ready to fight if Duckfoot were waiting for him—and the big coon fully expected that he was—the coons that lived longest were those that ran away when they could avoid fights. It would be distinctly to his advantage if he reached the tunnel ahead of Duckfoot.

Meeting no hound when he dropped into the tunnel, Old Joe sighed thankfully and scooted onwards. Again he chose the branch that led into the swamp, for there were various courses open now. If Duckfoot was waiting for him when he emerged into the swamp, he could always go back and through the tunnel's other branch.

Duckfoot was not waiting. A little relieved because there was no pursuit and a little worried for the same reason, Old Joe cut a winding trail into the swamp and circled back toward Willow Brook.

He plunged in, and climbed out when he came to another swamp. It was the one he'd sought in February, when he voluntarily left his magic sycamore and stopped to steal a chicken from Mun Munde on the way. Old Joe went unerringly to the same huge hollow oak.

There was still no hound on his trail and now he thought there'd be none. The finger of providence had crooked at the right moment, and Old Joe would run another autumn.

As he entered the hollow oak, he turned his sensitive nose away from the freezing wind that swept down. His premonition had been correct; winter would soon rule the Creeping Hills.

High in the great oak, Old Joe's sleeping mate awakened to growl. She surged forward and nipped his nose. Old Joe backed hastily away and chattered pleadingly. The next time he advanced, she let him come.

This winter they'd share the same den tree.



Harky Munde, who knew that a hound should not be heavily fed just before a hunt, still thought it unwise and unfair if they were allowed to run on a completely empty stomach. He chose a pork chop bone and some scraps of meat for Duckfoot's supper and took them out on the porch. Nobody had to tell him what had happened.

Duckfoot, who was always fed as soon as Mun and Harky finished eating, appreciated his suppers. Nothing except the scent of a coon could force him to be absent when his meal was ready, and the only place he might have scented a coon was down in the shocked corn.

Harky took Duckfoot's supper back into the house. Mun looked up inquiringly.

"He's off on a coon," Harky explained. "One must of come raiding in our corn and he winded it."

"He must of," Mun agreed. "Could it be by any chanst Old Joe, Harky?" Mun pleaded.

Harky said sadly, "I can't tell, Pa."

"Ain't you got a feelin'?" Mun persisted.

"I ain't had any kind of feeling I can count on since the night Melinda horned in on our coon hunt."

Mun sighed unhappily. "Goshamighty. Wish I'd of turn't her back that night."

"Wish you had," Harky agreed. "We wouldn't be in this fix now."

"If it's jest a common coon, Duckfoot'll soon have it up," Mun said. "You can git him an' still have the night to prow for Old Joe."

Harky said, "I'll go out for a listen."

Harky went out on the porch and strained to hear in the deepening night. His hopes rose. Duckfoot, a silent trailer, would come silently on any ordinary coon that might be raiding the shocked corn and he'd almost

surely tree it within hearing of the house. He would not get Old Joe up so easily. Harky rejoined Mun.

"I can't hear anything."

Mun said, "It could be Old Joe, then."

"It could be," Harky agreed. "Gol ding it! Are women late for everything? Even coon hunts?"

"Most times," said Mun, "'cept when they're early."

Harky laid out Mun's coon-hunting axe, filled the lantern, stuck the flashlight in his pocket, and put the .22 in easy reach. He stifled an urge to go out on the porch for another listen. This night the whole future of coon hunting in the Creeping Hills was at stake, but such confidence as Harky had possessed was fast waning. Taking a girl on a coon hunt had brought about this whole mess. Where was his assurance that taking the same girl on a second hunt would not result in an even more hopeless tangle?

What had seemed sheer inspiration, and a positive way to retrieve shattered legend by proving to Melinda that she was wrong and the coon hunters right, no longer seemed such a good idea. When Melinda did not come, Harky began to hope she wouldn't. Just as there seemed reason to think this hope might be realized, Melinda arrived.

She was dressed in the same costume she'd worn for the previous hunt, except that she wore two shirts instead of just one. Both together, however, did nothing to conceal the fact that no masculine coon hunter was bundled beneath them; Harky thought sourly that even if Melinda wore her father's bearskin coat she'd still look like a girl.

"Where you been?" he demanded.

"Why I came at nightfall, Harold," she answered. "I'm not late."

"Y'are too!"

Said Melinda, "You're so unreasonable, Harold. Isn't he, Mr. Mundee?"

"I figger—Yeah," said Mun.

Harky favored his traitorous father with a bitter glance. He put on his coat, and with the flashlight secure in a pocket he took the .22 and the coon-hunting axe in one hand and the lantern in the other.

"Duckfoot's gone," he said accusingly. "A coon come raiding our corn and he run off on it."

"It isn't my fault," Melinda pointed out. "Let's go find him."

"Where's Glory?"

"Outside, of course. Harold, if we take Glory down to your shocked corn, she'll pick up the same scent Duckfoot's already on. That way we'll find him easily, don't you think?"

Harky expressed what he thought in a ferocious scowl, his feelings in no way improved because Melinda had suggested the very thing he intended to do anyhow.

"C'mon," he said.

"Let me carry something."

"I got it, soon's I light the lantern."

Glory rose to meet them when they went out on the porch. Harky paused just long enough to listen, and went on. Now he was fairly certain that Duckfoot was again on Old Joe, for an ordinary coon would have been up, within hearing, before this. Without a backward glance, Harky moved toward the shocked corn.

Glory trotted away and began to tongue as she found scent. She ran directly to Willow Brook, was silent as she cast for the trail, and resumed tonguing when she found it. Harky determined her direction.

"They're on Old Joe again," Melinda pronounced. "We'll save time by going directly to his big sycamore."

Disdaining to answer, for he had been on the point of dazzling Melinda with this very suggestion, Harky started to run. He no longer deluded himself that he was the rushing wind, or even a racing deer, for the last time he'd entertained such notions Melinda had accused him of running slowly. But he knew a direct route to Old Joe's witch tree and a blackberry thicket on the way.

He crashed through it, holding the .22 and the axe across his chest and a little in front to divert the whipping canes, and he grunted with satisfaction when he heard Melinda gasp. Harky steered a course to Willow Brook.

There was a log there, a fallen pine that spanned a shallow pool, and it made an adequate bridge except during flood time. Harky held the lantern high, jumped on the log, and at once began a wild effort to keep his footing.

The night had turned colder. Running, he hadn't noticed the lower temperature or thought the log would be ice coated. His luck held. Harky danced to the far bank, jumped off the log, and continued running.

Duckfoot was tonguing at Old Joe's magic sycamore. Presently Glory joined him. Harky wondered. Duckfoot, who had been roaring constantly and furiously, suddenly began to yap like a puppy, and Glory trilled her tree bark. It seemed that even hounds were bewitched when girls horned in on coon hunts, but they had Old Joe up once again.

Reaching the sycamore, Harky discovered the two hounds alternately barking up the tree and cavorting around each other, with far more emphasis on the latter. A sudden suspicion entered Harky's mind. It was a good thing Duckfoot had run ahead of Glory or neither would have reached Old Joe's witch tree.

Harky felled a smaller tree. The lesser branches he sliced off at the trunk, the larger ones he stubbed to serve as hand- and foot-holds. With some effort, he leaned his ladder tree against the sycamore and turned to Melinda. The time for explaining was here.

"Can you shinny up behind me?" he demanded.

"Y—, yes, Harold."

There was something in her voice that had not been there before, a quaver that did not belong. Harky held the lantern high and turned toward her. Melinda's hat was missing, her dark hair plastered wetly against her head. Her clothes were soaking wet, her lips were blue with cold and her teeth chattered. Scratches left by the blackberry canes streaked her young cheeks.

"What in tunket happened to you?" Harky demanded.

"I fell in when we crossed the log," Melinda apologized. "I'm sorry."

"You can't climb when you're shiverin' that way," Harky said crossly. "You might fall and I don't want to carry you out of here. I'll warm you."

He unbuttoned her wet jacket, slipped it off her trembling shoulders, and at the same time opened his own coat. He drew her very near and buttoned his coat around the pair of them. A sudden electric shock coursed through him and all at once he was very pleasantly warm.

Harky put both arms around her and looked down at her upturned face. A stray star beam lighted it gently. Presently Melinda said,

"I'm warm now, Harold."

"Not warm enough," said Harky, who was astounded to discover that there was something more pleasant than looking for coons' dens. "I'll warm you some more. And call me Harky, huh?"

"Aren't we going to climb to Old Joe's den?" she asked shyly.

"Best not tonight," said Harky, who wouldn't have considered abandoning what he was doing for a dozen Old Joes. "We have to get you warm. Will you come coon hunting with me again, Melinda?"

"I'm afraid not, Harky," she said in a troubled voice.

"Why?"

"I simply cannot go anywhere too often with any boy who lets his father's corn stand in the shock when it should be brought in and husked."

"I'll bring it in," Harky promised recklessly. "I won't do a lick of hunting until it's all in and husked! How about a kiss, Melinda?"

"Oh, Harky!"

"Please!"

"M-mmm!"

It occurred to Harky, but only very vaguely, that Miss Cathby's foothold in the Creeping Hills was too solid ever to dislodge. But let what may happen. In years to come, Old Joe would still prowl on Willow Brook, hounds of Precious Sue's lineage would trail him, and Mundeeds would follow the hounds. Nothing could stop any part of it.

Harky had a feeling.

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