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1

Who'd Eat an Old Frog?

Leah Carter bent over the wood cookstove and opened the oven door. A delicious aroma wafted out. She inhaled it with enjoyment, then pulled out the large pan and placed it on the table. Looking around, she found the broom in the corner and quickly removed one of the straws. Coming back to the table, she leaned over the cake that bulged over the pan and plunged the straw into the top.

“Just right!” she said with satisfaction. She placed the cake aside and then stepped back to the stove, where a saucepan of chocolate was bubbling. She stood watching it for awhile, and when it looked right she picked up the pan and went to the cake. Carefully she added the icing and then, putting the saucepan down, examined her creation. “You look like a fine cake,” she said.

“You talking to yourself, Leah?”

She jumped, startled, and turned to the man who had come in. “Uncle Silas,” she scolded, “I wish you wouldn’t sneak up on me like that!”

“I wasn’t sneaking.” Silas Carter grinned at her with an air of innocence. He was a small man with a full white beard and a pair of merry blue eyes. “I came clomping in like a herd of elephants.” A sly smirk touched his lips, and he said, “I think you must be thinking about some young man.”

“I was not!” Leah protested.

“Well, have it your own way.” Uncle Silas walked over to the table and looked down at the cake. “How ’bout I have a piece of that?”

“No, that’s for supper.”

“Well, let me just taste the icing.”

When her uncle reached out to draw his finger across the frosting, Leah squealed, “Don’t you dare!” Turning, she picked up the saucepan. “Here, you can scrape the pan.” She watched him greedily lick the spoon, then begin scraping at the thick icing on the inside. “You’re just like a child,” she exclaimed, shaking her head.

Silas did not stop eating the icing. “Well, I did without good cooking so long,” he said between bites, “I don’t miss many chances.”

“I hope you’ve got something to do today,” Leah said. “I can’t cook with you underfoot all the time.”

“I’ll just sit right over here.” Silas drew a cane-bottomed chair from under the table and moved it against the wall. Carefully he sat down and tilted it back, placing his heels on the rung. “Now this is what I like. Lots of good food and a fine-looking young woman to do the housework! I should have thought of this a long time ago.”

“You’re spoiled,” Leah accused the old man.

Silas nodded cheerfully. “About time, I say.” He gave the spoon another healthy swipe with his tongue. “If I had known I could’ve had a life like this, I would’ve gotten sick a long time ago.”

Silas’s two nieces, Leah and Sarah Carter, had come all the way to Virginia from Kentucky to care for him after he had gotten ill. They had, he insisted, saved his life from the awful woman he’d hired to take care of him. He had grown very fond of the girls and had been saddened when Sarah had to

return home. She had had a slight misunderstanding with the Confederate authorities. In fact, she'd been falsely accused of being a spy and had been forced to leave Richmond.

Looking over at Leah, Silas said, "I'm sure glad you could stay and take care of me. I miss Sarah, though. She sure is a fine girl!"

Leah was busy rattling pans, getting ready to cook the evening meal. "I miss her too. And Pa and Ma—and Esther."

"Too bad Sarah had to go home. I was sad to see it happen—but not as sorry as Tom."

He gave the spoon one more lick, then gruffly said, "I guess he's all she writes about in her letters." He handed the pan to Leah and said, "What time are the Majors boys coming?"

She began cleaning the saucepan. "They said they'd be here late this afternoon."

"I was surprised that they could get off, what with this battle shaping up," Uncle Silas said.

The mention of the battle caused Leah to frown. "I guess it's only because Lt. Majors is still weak from being in that ole Yankee prison camp. I still don't like the way he looks. He ought to take a month off."

"I don't think he's going to get it, though, the way the Yankees are headed this way. We'll need every man we can get to hold off them blue-bellies." Silas tilted his chair forward and stood to his feet. "What all we having for supper? I'm hungry already."

"You get out of here, Uncle Silas," Leah scolded. "I can't get a thing done with you around, and you're not going to spoil your supper by getting into that cake!"

Silas shook his head sadly. “That was exactly my intention,” he said. “But you’re the boss in the kitchen, so I’ll go out and hoe the beans a little bit.”

Leah, looking out the window, smiled as her uncle picked up a hoe and headed for the garden. As he began hoeing slowly and methodically, she thought again how strange it was that she was here in Richmond. She’d grown up in Kentucky, but when the war came that state had split in two—half for the Union and half for the South. The Carter family had been for the Union—her own brother, Royal, was serving in the Union army. The thought of Royal made her sad for a moment. She was afraid he was in the Army of the Potomac that everyone said was headed for Richmond.

She thought of the job of getting the chicken ready for supper. She didn’t like that part of cooking—killing the chicken. But it was something that had to be done.

She went out into the chicken yard where the white birds flocked to her, expecting to be fed. *I wish there was some way to eat chickens without killing them*, she thought. She loved animals, and it was hard to choose one, but she did. She quickly went through the ritual of killing the bird and picking the feathers off. When she came back into the house, she complained, “I should’ve waited and made Jeff do that.”

As she cut the chicken into parts and put them in a bowl, she thought about Jeff Majors. He and Tom were the two sons of Lt. Nelson Majors, and Leah had known them all her life. They had been neighbors back in Kentucky. Lt. Majors was from Virginia though, and after Fort Sumter was fired on

he'd taken his family South. Here he'd joined the Confederate army, as had his sons, Tom and Jeff.

As Leah thought of Jeff, her eyes brightened. "I wish he didn't have to go to that war. He's not really old enough—only fifteen." Jeff was a drummer boy in his father's company. She and Jeff had grown up together, were more like brother and sister, and he'd said he was glad she'd come to Richmond, for he had been lonesome for her.

Finally all the dinner preparations were completed. Just as she finished, Leah heard her uncle call out, "Here they come, Leah."

She whipped off her apron and ran out the door. She stopped on the porch as three men in a wagon waved and called to her.

Leah looked for Jeff, who sprang out of the wagon first. He was a tall boy with the blackest hair she'd ever seen. His eyes also were black. He was wearing a gray Confederate uniform with buttons down the front and looked very handsome, she thought. She wouldn't say so, however.

As he came up to her, she pouted. "I should have known you'd come in time for supper. You never miss a meal, do you?"

Jeff Majors grinned. "I'd be a fool if I did, with as good a cook as you are."

His dark eyes gleamed with humor, and he looked her over. She was wearing a light blue dress today with white trim around the neck and sleeves and had tied her long blonde hair with a single bow.

"Why, you look right pretty, Leah. It's always good when you have a pretty cook instead of an ugly one."

Leah flushed with pleasure, for Jeff didn't pay her many compliments. "You wouldn't care if an

ape cooked your food, Jeff Majors!" She turned then to greet his father and brother and thought, *I reckon Nelson Majors is one of the handsomest men in the world.*

Lt. Majors was indeed fine looking, over six feet tall, dark-skinned, having the same black hair that Jeff had. He had hazel eyes, however, that were very unusual. He bowed formally to Leah and said, "Miss Leah, I'm sorry for you—a troop of hungry soldiers here to be fed."

Leah took the hand he held out and, when he kissed it, blushed. "All you officers talk fancy," she said.

"So do we corporals." Tom Majors, tall and dark like his father, came to shake Leah's hand himself. He grinned at her. "I feel like I could eat a bear."

"Well, we don't have any bears," she said. "But you sit out here on the porch and talk. Supper'll be ready as soon as I call you."

She went back inside and quickly put the chicken on to fry. As it did, she set the table, putting on Uncle Silas's best white tablecloth. She placed a bowl of fresh flowers, including violets and daisies, in the middle of the table. By the time she'd done all that and mashed the potatoes, the chicken was almost done. She went to the door and called, "Come and get it while it's hot."

The four men came in, and Lt. Majors's eyes opened wide as he looked at the table. "Why, this is like eating at a fancy hotel in Richmond, only better."

Tom said almost reverently as he sniffed the air, "That doesn't smell like anything we get to eat in camp. Come on, let's lay our ears back and pitch into it!"

Jeff laughed. "You've got the manners of a wild hog, Tom."

Tom hit his younger brother on the shoulder. "My manners are as good as yours, I reckon, Brother."

The men sat down and spoke of how pretty the table was set.

When Leah had brought the heaping platter of fried chicken and set it down, she seated herself. "There! We can get started."

Silas bowed his head, and the others followed his example. "Father," he prayed, "we thank You for this food. We thank You for these guests, and we pray for our folks at home. We acknowledge that every good gift comes from You. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen."

"Amen!" Lt. Majors said and looked around the loaded table. "Well, we're not going to be hungry if we get on the outside of this food." He looked at the golden fried chicken, the pork chops, the heaping bowl of mashed potatoes, a bowl of poke sallet, and other vegetables. Then he picked up a piece of fresh-baked bread and took a bite. "Oh, my!" He sighed. "I feel like I'm going to commit gluttony."

They all fell to, and Leah was pleased at the way everyone ate. She kept their glasses filled with sweet milk, except for Jeff, who liked buttermilk better. A constant stream of compliments came her way, and she was happy that she'd been able to satisfy them.

When they had slowed down and began shoving their plates back, Leah rose, saying, "You're not through yet."

"Not dessert! I didn't save any room," Jeff protested.

Leah smiled at him sweetly. "That's all right, Jeff. Your father and brother can eat your share."

She left and came back with the cake she had made earlier. When Jeff saw it, he cried out, "Not chocolate-iced cake!"

Leah put down the cake and said innocently, "Too bad you're so full you can't eat any."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you just watch!" He waited as patiently as he could while Leah sliced a piece for each of them.

Jeff started shoveling the dessert into his mouth, and his father said, "Son, you sound like a pig snorting and grunting. I'm ashamed of you."

"I'm sorry, Pa," Jeff said with his mouth stuffed full. "You know how I can resist anything except temptation and dessert."

While the men ate, Leah filled their cups with coffee. "This is about the last of the real coffee," she said. "You'd better enjoy it."

The room became relatively quiet as they ate their dessert. But finally Uncle Silas groaned and said, "Girl, you've done us all in!"

Leah laughed at him, and a dimple popped into her cheek. "It's not my fault you all eat like pigs. You didn't have to."

"Yes, we did, Leah," Tom disagreed. "Any man who wouldn't fill himself up on food like this, why, he's no man at all."

They sat around the table then, enjoying one another's company. Soon they began to talk about the war.

Silas asked, "Nelson, what's the talk around headquarters about this army McClelland's got?"

The lieutenant grew serious. He tapped on the white tablecloth with one forefinger and shook his

head. "We've got word that he's got over one hundred thousand men."

"How many do we have, Pa?" Jeff asked.

"Well, not that many—maybe seventy thousand in all."

"Well, one rebel could whip five Yankees," Tom said at once.

His father shook his head. "I've heard that said before. But from what I've seen, it's just not so. Those Union soldiers at Bull Run—they fought just about as hard as men could fight."

"But they ran away—we whipped them," Jeff said, chewing on another piece of cake.

Lt. Majors looked at his younger son. "You know, Jeff, in one way I'm sorry we won that battle."

"Sorry we *won!*" Jeff exclaimed. "How can you say that?"

"It's made us overconfident, I'm afraid. All you hear is how we put the run on the Yankees, but one battle's not the war."

Silas nodded. "I think you're right, Nelson. From what I hear, the Yankees went back, put their heads down, and started building a big army and lots of war factories. About all we've done around here is brag about how we whipped them in one battle."

Jeff seemed astounded. "Why, I don't see how you can talk like that! We've been training and drilling every day. We'll be ready for them."

"I don't doubt we'll do the best we can," his father said, "and after all, we're fighting for our homes, and they're intruders."

They talked for a while longer about the war, then changed the subject. With a battle coming up, they were all a little apprehensive and somewhat depressed. They talked about Esther, Nelson

Major's baby daughter. His wife had died giving birth to Esther, and it had been the Carters, back in Kentucky, who volunteered to take the girl until the Majors could do better.

"I got a letter from your mother," Lt. Majors said to Leah. He took it out of his pocket. "You might want to read it." He smiled saying, "She claims that Esther's even prettier than you were when you were a baby."

Leah smiled too and took the letter. "Well, she is. She's the prettiest baby I ever saw." As she read, she thought of what a tie Esther had made between the two families. They were divided by the war, but they were together in the task of raising Esther Majors. Handing the letter on to Uncle Silas to read, she said, "I wish I could see her. I miss her so much."

"So do I," the lieutenant said, a frown darkening his face. "A man wants to see his children, and this war won't permit that."

Leah rose and said, "I'll do the dishes."

"Well, I'll help," Tom said. "And you too, Jeff."

"I'm too full," Jeff protested.

But Tom reached down, grabbed him by the hair, and jerked him squealing to his feet.

"You'll help, or I'll strap you." But he laughed.

The young people cleaned up the supper dishes while Silas and Nelson Majors sat on the front porch. The three made a game out of it, laughing and having a good time. Finally they finished and walked out onto the porch too, where they sat until it grew dark.

"Guess we need to go inside. The skeeters are gonna be getting bad," Silas said.

But Jeff said suddenly, "Have you been listening to that big old frog croaking down at the creek?"

“Sounds like a bull, don’t he?” Silas nodded. “He’s a big one!”

“I’d like to go get me a mess of frogs,” Jeff said.

Silas said, “Well, there’s a frog gig in the shed over there. It’s kind of rusty, but I reckon it’ll do. If you want to go, take you a lantern and have at it.”

Jeff brightened.

Leah knew he liked any kind of hunting and fishing.

“Come on, Tom,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Not me. I’m going to go inside and sit down and not do a thing. I’ve got a feeling we’re going to be pretty busy after we go back.”

Jeff looked at Leah. “Leah, you come. You can hold the lantern while I do the gigging.”

Leah made a face, wrinkling up her nose. “Who’d eat an old frog?”

“I would,” Jeff said. He cocked his head to one side and begged, “Come on, Leah. It’ll be fun.”

“Don’t do it, Leah,” Tom advised. “He’ll have you doing all the work. That’s the way Jeff is.”

Leah let Jeff coax for a little while, then said, “All right, but I’m going to put on my old clothes.” She went to her room and put on a pair of frayed overalls and old shoes.

When she went outside, Jeff was waiting, holding a lantern and a long pole and a sack. “Look! This ought to get ’em.” He showed her the gig, which looked like a small pitchfork with four prongs, each having a barb.

Then they walked down to the road, turned, and went on to the creek. The moon had begun to rise—a full moon, like a huge silver dish. By the light of it, Leah could see a small, flat-bottomed wooden boat.

“You get in front,” Jeff said. “I’ll do the paddling.”

Leah scrambled into the boat, holding the lantern carefully.

Jeff got in after her, picked up the paddle, and began to row slowly downstream.

“It’s sure quiet,” Leah said.

At that moment a huge bull frog said, “*Harumph!*” and she nearly jumped out of the boat.

“Hold it! Hold that lantern up!” Jeff cried.

Leah held the light high, and Jeff brought the boat to a stop. “Let’s sit still,” he said quietly. He picked up the frog gig and laid down the paddle. “There,” he said, “see there—there he is—look at the size of that frog!”

Leah peered into the night, but the lantern light almost blinded her. Finally she did manage to see two gleaming eyes and made out the shape of a large frog perched on the bank.

“Careful now—don’t move,” Jeff whispered. He picked up the paddle again, maneuvered the boat close to the bank, and grasped the frog gig. Then with a sudden lunge he speared the frog. “Got him!” he exclaimed. He pulled the frog in and removed him from the barbed prongs. As he dropped him into the sack, he said with satisfaction, “Kick all you want to, frog, but you’ll be breakfast tomorrow!”

The frog thumped in the sack on the bottom of the boat, and Leah said again, “I don’t want to eat any old frog!”

“Did you ever eat frog legs?”

“No, I never did. There’s lots of things I haven’t eaten.”

“Why, you’d like them. They’re better than chicken.” Jeff nodded. “Come on, let’s move on down.”

For the next two hours, they paddled slowly down the small stream. Although Leah did not like gigging frogs, she did enjoy being out in the quiet of the night. The mosquitoes, for some reason, were not as bad as usual. They just sang a high, whining song around her ears occasionally. She took a few bites from them, but she was used to that.

Finally Jeff said, “Well, we’ve got enough for all of us.” He turned the boat around, and they made their way back upstream.

“Be careful. Don’t fall in the creek,” he warned, when Leah got out. He followed her, tied up the boat, and picked up his sack of frogs. “Never got so many big frogs in my whole life.” He picked up the gig too. “Let’s get back.”

They walked up the road by lantern light and moonlight, and when they got back to the house, he said, “Let’s go in the backyard—I’ll clean these tonight.”

Leah went with him, and when they got there she held the lantern for him.

“This won’t take long.” Jeff pulled a knife from his pocket and opened it.

Leah watched as he cleaned the frogs and admired how efficiently he did it. “I wish I could clean chickens as easy as you do frogs,” she said finally.

“Well, frogs don’t have feathers.” The amber light of the lantern picked up his bright eyes, and he laughed. “That’d be something, wouldn’t it—a frog with feathers!”

Soon the frogs were cleaned, and Jeff washed off their catch under the pump. "Pretty good night's work!" he said.

They went inside to find that Tom had gone to bed, but Jeff's father and Uncle Silas were still talking.

Looking up, Silas asked, "Did you get any?"

"Did I get any?" Jeff said. "You never saw such frogs!

"And look how dirty I am!" said Leah. "I'm going to wash up and go to bed. Good night, Jeff."

"Good night, Leah. We'll go again."

As soon as she was gone, the lieutenant grinned at his son. "She's not only pretty, she's a good helper, isn't she? Not every young woman would go frogging with a fellow. You'd better hang onto her."

Jeff said, "Pa, I wish this war was over and we were back in Kentucky."

Nelson Major's face grew sober. "I wish it too. But you can never go back and be what you were." He looked over at his son, rose, and slapped him on the shoulder. "We just have to take what we are, where we are, and trust God," he said quietly. "Let's go to bed, Jeff."

2

The Battle Begins

Breakfast the next morning was rather strange. Leah got up expecting to fix her usual fare of bacon, eggs, and biscuits. Instead she found, to her surprise, Jeff standing in front of the stove.

“What are you doing, Jeff?”

“Fixing breakfast.” He was wearing a white cotton shirt and a pair of worn trousers in place of his uniform. “This time I’ll be the cook,” he announced. “You can make the coffee if you want to.”

Leah looked at the bowl of frog legs sitting on the counter next to the stove. “I’m not going to eat any of those ole things!” she proclaimed.

“It’s that or nothing,” he said with a grin. “You’ll like them. Sit down and watch an expert.”

So Leah sat and watched as Jeff began cooking the frog legs. It was really like frying chicken, she thought.

Uncle Silas came in, followed by Tom and Jeff’s father.

Tom said, “Well, this looks good. I’ll just help you set the table, Jeff, and make the coffee.” He busied himself.

And soon the meal was ready.

Jeff put the huge platter of frog legs on the table, along with a large tray of biscuits that he had warmed in the oven. He glanced at Leah with a mischievous look as he sat down. “Why don’t you ask the blessing, Leah?” he asked innocently. “And be

sure you give a special thanks to the Lord for these frog legs.”

Leah flushed and shook her head stubbornly. “I won’t do it! I’m thankful for almost anything but not those old frog legs!”

“I’ll do it,” Tom said cheerfully. He asked a simple blessing—paying special heed to the frog legs—and when he said, “Amen,” he reached out and speared one of the succulent legs from the platter. Grabbing a biscuit in his left hand, he began to take alternate bites. “Boy, this is good! Nothing like good, fresh frog legs for breakfast!”

The men all were grinning as they ate. Leah saw they were watching her. She sat bolt upright, her lips set in a stubborn line.

Finally Silas said, “Just try one, Leah. It won’t kill you.”

Leah looked at him and then sniffed. “Well, all right, but just one.” She picked up a frog leg from the platter and took a small bite. She took another bite.

“It’s good, isn’t it? I told you it would be,” Jeff said. “Just jump in now and eat all you want.”

Leah found, to her surprise, that she really did like frog legs. They tasted a little like chicken and a little like fish.

“Now every time you want a good meal, all you have to do is go out and gig you a frog,” Jeff said.

“No, I wouldn’t stick that gig into a frog or anything else.”

“You’re not as tenderhearted toward the chickens though,” Jeff teased. “I’ve seen you wring the neck of many a fine bird.”

“Chickens are different,” Leah argued. “Anyway, I’m not giggling any old frogs.”

After the meal, she cleaned up, and soon afterward Lt. Majors and Tom took their leave.

"We've got to get back to camp," the lieutenant said. "We sure appreciate that good meal, Leah. You're a fine cook." He turned to Silas. "Thanks for having us out."

Jeff said, rather formally, "Let me stay another night, will you, Lieutenant? I don't have anything to do when I get back to camp. Maybe I can go hunting and get some rabbits for Mr. Carter."

His father glanced at Leah, cocking his head to one side. He looked back at Jeff and looked about to tease the boy but must have decided better of it. "If it's all right with Mr. Carter, it's all right with me," he said. "As long as you're back tomorrow."

"Let the boy stay." Silas nodded. "Some fresh jackrabbit would go down pretty good."

"All right then."

Lt. Majors and Tom said their good-byes and went out and climbed into the wagon. Jeff and Leah came outside and waved as they disappeared.

"Can I go hunting with you, Jeff?"

"Why, sure. It'll be like old times. But first I've got to teach your Uncle Silas who's the best checker player." He went back inside and challenged his host. "I'm ready to show you how to be a real checker player, Mr. Carter."

"All right, we'll see about that."

Uncle Silas set up a board on the kitchen table, and soon the two were deeply engaged in a fierce battle.

Leah was amused at the seriousness with which Jeff took the game. When he made an especially good move, he would pound the table, making the checkers jump up and down, and shout, "Yahoo!"

On the other hand, when Silas jumped one or two of his men, Jeff would scowl and hunch down in his chair as if preparing to make a bayonet charge.

Finally at midmorning the game was interrupted when someone called out, "Hello, is anyone home?"

Leah went to the door and saw a young neighbor outside, Rafe Tolliver. He was sixteen years old—and she had thought at times that he was fond of her. "Come in, Rafe," she invited.

Rafe Tolliver was tall with blond hair and light blue eyes. He looked Leah over, then said, "Hi, Jeff. Are you giving him a good thrashing?"

Silas grinned. "I've beat him three out of five. I guess that makes me the champion."

"No, it don't," Jeff argued heatedly. "We're going to play the best eight out of ten."

Rafe winked at Leah, saying, "After they settle which one of them is best, *I'll* teach them how to play checkers."

"What are you doing today, Rafe?"

"I'm going hunting after chores. I've got my dog all ready. I expect I'll get me a mess of coons."

Jeff looked up quickly. "I'd like to go, Rafe, if I wouldn't be in the way."

"Why, shoot! You can't get too many people out on a coon hunt." Rafe grinned. He obviously liked Jeff. Then he looked over at Leah and said, "If you'll get out of that dress and into your old overalls, I'll let you go too. What're you all dressed up for?"

Leah felt her face flush. She had put on her second-best dress, a light yellow affair with white daisies crocheted across the front. "Oh, I just like to wear a nice dress every once in a while."

“She wears it when she eats frog legs.” Uncle Silas grinned slyly. “I’ll bet she’d wear it for some good fried coon, wouldn’t you, Leah?”

Leah turned and walked away, saying, “Oh, you hush, Uncle Silas!”

Rafe said, “I guess we’ll go about dusk tonight. I’ve got my chores to do. Come on over to our place about six. Better bring some grub too, Leah. We’re liable to get hungry out there.”

“Rafe’s a pretty nice fellow, isn’t he?” Jeff asked Leah after the boy left.

“Oh, yes, he is. He helps Uncle Silas sometimes with things only a man can do.”

“I thought you could do anything a man could do,” he teased. Then he threw up both hands. “Wait a minute! Don’t shoot! I was just kidding.” He looked out the window and watched Rafe disappear into the distance. “I think he’s kind of sweet on you. He looked like it to me.”

“Don’t be silly!”

“I’m not being silly. Just shows he has good taste.”

Leah shot a look at Jeff, then blushed. “I don’t know about that. He’s a nice boy, though.” She changed the subject, saying, “If we’re going to go hunting, I’ll need to get all my work done too. Why don’t you go out there and work on that woodpile? Uncle Silas will be needing at least two or three cords this winter.”

“All right, I’ll do that.”

* * *

“Well, how do you like this new dog of mine?” Rafe asked, putting his hand proudly on the head of a large coonhound.

“He looks good. What is he?”

“This here’s a black-and-tan. Best coon dog in the world!”

The dog’s fur was black with a bluish tinge, except for his muzzle and feet. These were soft brown like a fine suede jacket. He had a glossy coat and clear bright eyes. He held his tail above his back, and he looked wide awake, not tired like some dogs.

“He weighs over fifty pounds. Look at those muscles on him!”

“What’s his name?” Leah asked.

“His name’s Stonewall, named after the general.”

“You can’t get a name better than that.” Jeff grinned. He put his hand out, and the dog sniffed, then licked it. “Sure is a fine dog. Is he good with coons?”

“Good with coons? Of course he is. Why, I wouldn’t have a dog that wouldn’t get a coon,” Rafe said indignantly.

“Is he fast?” Jeff demanded.

“Well, he’s fast enough.” Rafe shrugged. “Fastest dog’s a greyhound. But what would one of them things be worth on a coon hunt? Nothing! What counts is smarts. A dog’s either smart or dumb. You can teach him lots of things, but you can’t teach him sense. Either he’s got it,” Rafe pronounced, “or he ain’t got it. You two about ready to go?”

Jeff nodded, and they left the house. A big moon was shining, and far off the barking of dogs sounded like bells. “Somebody else out hunting,” Jeff remarked.

“Yep, but they ain’t got no Stonewall dog like we got.”

They made their way along the road for awhile, then turned into the deep woods. They walked for what seemed hours to Leah, the two boys chatting from time to time. They seemed to have forgotten her, which made her feel a little left out. *I wish it was just Jeff and me on this coon hunt*, she thought. *Those two won’t do anything but talk about dogs all night long.*

The moon was rising quickly, and all of a sudden Stonewall let out a strange sound. It was half bark and half howl. He was somewhere up ahead, and Rafe said excitedly, “That’s a coon!”

“How do you know? Maybe it’s a possum.”

Rafe began to run, but he shouted disgustedly, “Why, Stonewall would die of shame if he ever took out after a possum! He knows he’s a coon dog, not a possum dog.”

They ran hard as the dog bayed, and they finally reached a big tree with Stonewall at the bottom. “He’s got one treed all right, but I can’t see it. We’ll have to wait a while here. Maybe build a fire so we can see what we’re doing.”

For a while, they circled the tree, trying to see through the darkness. But none of them could spot a coon.

“You know what I think?” Rafe said suddenly.

“What’s that, Rafe?” Leah asked.

“Look how close these trees are together. I think that ole coon went up this tree”—he pointed upward, moving his arm—“climbed out on one of those limbs, and jumped into another tree and then maybe another tree.”

Jeff looked around. "I've known coons to do that, all right. I had me a dog back in Kentucky named Rocky. You know, he knew how to mark a tree. He'd figure out that the critter must've gone to another tree, and he'd start searching until he found Mr. Coon, maybe just coming down."

"Ain't no dog that smart," Rafe said.

"Rocky was. Anyhow, let's kind of spread out. There ain't nothing up in this tree."

Sure enough, the dog struck a scent some hundred yards away.

"Told you," Jeff said. "He got out of that first tree. Let's get him."

Evidently the coon was smarter than any of them and even smarter than the dog, for they could not catch him.

Finally Leah was out of breath and tired. "I can't go much farther," she panted.

Jeff must have seen that she was about past going. "Me too. Let's build a fire, Rafe. We'll eat something, then go after him again."

"All right," Rafe agreed.

They set about finding an open spot. The boys quickly found enough dead wood to make a fire, and soon a merry crackling blaze drove the darkness back. They sat down, and Leah opened the sack they had taken turns carrying.

"I'm hungry," she announced.

"What've you got in there?" Rafe demanded. "Whatever it is, it'll be good."

Leah began pulling out food and handing it off. "Well, here's some cold fried chicken—and here's some frog legs we had left. Jeff, you liked them so much, you can have all of them. Here's some baked potatoes and some biscuits."

“Let me have some of all of it,” Jeff said.

They sat around the fire eating, quickly at first, then slowing down. When they were full, Leah said, “That’s all, except for some fried pies.”

Jeff sat up straight. “Fried *apple* pies?”

“Yes. I hid them from you and your greedy relatives.”

“Gimme!” Jeff held out his hand.

“There’s only three of them. Just one apiece.”

“Well, let me eat yours. You don’t like them much anyway, Leah.”

“I do so!” she said offendedly. “Don’t be such a pig.”

Jeff took his pie and sat back. “I’ll give you all my share of the coon, if you’ll give me your pie, Rafe.”

“Nothing doing. I can catch a coon anytime.” Rafe grinned. “But I can’t get fried pies like this!”

They ate the pies and then decided they were thirsty.

“There’s a creek back a ways, but I’m too tired and full to go get a drink,” Jeff said.

“Let’s just rest awhile.” Leah leaned against a tree. She looked at the fire and said, “I love being out in the woods like this, where it’s nice and quiet and with a nice fire.”

“Well, you’re in good company too.” Rafe grinned. “That makes a big difference.

Leah smiled at him and nodded. “It sure does, Rafe.”

Rafe glanced at Jeff. “Well, Jeff, you’ve got to go back to the army, but I’ll be sure Leah gets to go coon hunting and maybe trout lining once in a while.”

Jeff gave him an angry look but said nothing.

They sat talking, letting the sounds of the night filter through to them. And finally Rafe lay back and soon began to snore.

“He sounds like a sawmill!” Jeff exclaimed. “I don’t see how anybody could sleep in the same house with him.”

“He *is* loud, isn’t he?” Leah giggled. She looked over to where the young man was lying on his back, his mouth wide open. “It’d be mean if I found a bug and dropped it in there, wouldn’t it?”

“It might be fun. Do you want to do it?”

“No, he might get mad.”

“We could tell him that it fell out of a tree,” Jeff suggested.

“No, it would be mean. You wouldn’t want someone to do that to you, would you?”

“It’s been worse in camp. They pull some awful tricks on us young fellas—the older soldiers do.”

The fire crackled, and Jeff reached over and put a few more sticks on it. As he stirred them, the sparks swirled high into the air. He said, “It looks like those sparks are mingling with the stars, don’t it, Leah?”

Leah looked up and saw indeed that the white cold stars were all mixed up with the hot flaming sparks. “One of my teachers told me those stars are on fire. They don’t look it, do they?”

“No, they don’t. They look like icy points, real cold. But they do flicker sometimes. They last a little bit longer than those sparks, though.”

“I wish I knew all their names—all those stars, I mean.”

“Pa knows a lot of them,” Jeff said. “He taught me some. That right up there—see it—that real bright one? That one’s called Sirius. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Serious? How could a star be serious?”

“I don’t know. That’s just what Pa said. Look! There’s the Big Dipper. See?”

“I can’t see it. Never could pick it out.”

Jeff came over and sat down. He put his hand on her head and put his face next to hers. “Now look—right where I’m pointing your head—” He held her head steady, then released one hand and put his arm out. “Right along my arm. Just take a sight. It looks like a dipper turned upside down.”

“I don’t see a thing.”

Jeff shook his head. “Look! See that star, those four—they make the cup of the dipper. The other part is bent over.”

“I see it! I see it!” Leah suddenly turned, and her eyes were beaming with pleasure. “First time I could ever pick it out. Oh, Jeff, that’s exciting!”

Jeff grinned at her and leaned back. “You’re not hard to entertain. I’ve been seeing the Big Dipper all my life. I thought everybody did.”

They both fell quiet for awhile, and finally Leah said, “I think a lot about those days when we were growing up back home.”

“So do I.” Jeff hesitated. “Pa says we can never have that time again.”

“We can go back there after the war’s over.”

“I don’t know about that.” Jeff shrugged. “Even if we did, we’ll be old.”

“Old?” Leah stared at him with shock. “What do you mean, old?”

“Well, just look at it. If the war lasts another two or three years, we’ll be nearly eighteen, nineteen years old. That’s old.”

“That’s not old. Sarah’s eighteen, and Tom’s nineteen, and they’re not old.”

Jeff picked up a stick and began to dig in the dirt with it. "Maybe not. But when you're fifteen, nineteen seems old. Why, when you're that old, you have to get married, have a family, and work all the time!"

"Well, that's the way it is," Leah protested. "What else would you do?"

Jeff grinned at her. "I'd like to be rich and have people wait on me all the time, get everything I want, and go where I want to go."

Leah laughed aloud at him. "That's silly! You wouldn't like that."

"Wouldn't mind trying it for awhile." Jeff shrugged. "Might beat working."

"I think about Tom and Sarah a lot. I wish they would get married, but of course they can't while the war's on."

"Tom's really sad. He doesn't show it much, but he thinks about Sarah all the time."

"Does he ever talk to you about her?"

"One time he did. It was just before the battle at Bull Run—the night before, as a matter of fact. We were sitting around talking and thinking about it, and all of a sudden Tom said, 'If I get killed, I'll miss it all.' I asked him what that meant, and he said, 'Never get married, never have children, never watch them grow up—miss it all.'"

He turned to Leah. "It really made me sad. That was the first time I saw how grieved Tom was to not be able to marry your sister."

"I think Sarah feels the same. She writes about Tom, and I can tell she's hurting on the inside."

"Well, we don't have to worry about that since you're fourteen and I'm fifteen," Jeff said. "I don't

want to get married till I'm real old, maybe twenty-five."

Leah said, "Why, I know girls that get married when they're only fifteen. Just a year older than I am."

"That what's on your mind—getting married next year?" Jeff teased.

Rafe suddenly erupted with an enormous burst of sound, and she glanced over at him.

"Maybe you ought to marry Rafe there." Jeff grinned. "You wouldn't have to worry about sleeping much. I swear, he'd keep the regiment awake!"

They kept on talking, and for Leah it was a time of peace and relaxation. They had been so caught up with the war and the hardships that she treasured moments like these.

Rafe snorted, then sat up abruptly. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. "Well, were you going to let me sleep all night?" he demanded. He got to his feet, stretched hugely, and said, "Let's go get them coons."

They did get a coon later that night. Stonewall treed it, and Rafe shot it out of the tree.

As it fell to the ground and lay still, the dog yapped around it excitedly.

"Get away from there, Stonewall!" Rafe commanded. He carefully poked the raccoon with the muzzle of his rifle. "A big, fat one!" he said with satisfaction. "Probably been eating on somebody's corn."

"It's too early for corn." Carefully Jeff reached out and picked the animal up by its tail. His eyes widened, and he said, "Why, this coon must weigh thirty pounds!"

“He’s a good’un,” Rafe said. “You want to try for another one?”

“Not me. I’ve got to get back. I’ve got to leave for camp this morning.”

“All right. Come on, Stonewall.”

The two boys took turns carrying the heavy coon, and Leah carried the gun. When they got back to Rafe’s house, she watched as he expertly cleaned the animal and divided it.

“Take this and cook it up for your Uncle Silas. He’s partial to some fresh coon. Be sure and cook some sweet potatoes with it. That goes down pretty good.”

Jeff came over and put out his hand. “Thanks a lot for letting us go with you, Rafe. That’s a fine dog you got there. I hope I have one as good one of these days.”

“I hope you will.” Rafe hesitated, then said, “You be careful, Jeff, when that battle starts. Don’t want nothing to happen to you.”

Jeff and Leah walked away from the Tolliver place, and on the way back Jeff said, “I like Rafe.”

“So do I.”

“I reckon he’ll be in the army soon. He’s sixteen now. We’ve got fellas younger than that. I expect he’ll join up.”

The thought depressed Leah. “It seems like everybody has to suffer in this war—all the young men, and then the mothers and sisters have to stay home and worry.”

There was nothing to say to that.

Suddenly Jeff stopped. “What was that?”

Leah halted too. They stood there in the bright moonlight and listened. “Thunder, I think.”

But Jeff shook his head. "That's not thunder—that's artillery. Way off over there." He strained his eyes, then shook his head. "Too far away to see the powder flashes, but I've heard it enough to know that's what it is."

They went into the house and found that Silas was already up and stirring around. He liked to get up early, and when Leah produced the coon, he was pleased. "That'll go down all right," he said.

Jeff said, "I've got to get back." He paused, then told Uncle Silas, "The battle's starting. I hear the guns."

His leaving was a sad time for all three of them.

Leah had prepared a huge box of cookies for Jeff to take back to share with the rest of his company. After he said good-bye to Silas, she walked out with him and handed him the box, saying, "Be sure Tom and your father get some of these. And the rest of the company too—your friends."

"I'll see to that." Jeff hesitated longer and finally burst out, "I sure hate to go, Leah! I surely do!"

They stood facing each other, torn by the grief that came at times like this, and finally he said awkwardly, "Well, I guess I've got to go." He put out his hand, and she took it. Trying to grin, he said, "We had us a good time, didn't we? Your first frog legs and that fine coon hunt!"

"Yes, we did." Leah's voice was so quiet, she knew he could hardly hear it.

He pulled his hand back, turned, and started walking toward the road. "I'll get me a ride," he called back. "Somebody's bound to be going toward Richmond. Good-bye, Leah."

“Good-bye, Jeff. Be careful.” She watched until he was out of sight, then walked back into the house.

She was quiet all morning, and finally, as the sound of artillery grew louder, her uncle said, “Lee’s gone up against the Yankees. I think it’ll be a bad one.”

“The South won before—at Bull Run.”

Uncle Silas looked in the direction of Richmond, then turned to her, and his face was drawn and serious. “I don’t think they’ll be whipped that easy this time.”

Leah came and put her arms around him. She was crying.

He put his arms around her, and she clung to him. He finally murmured, “God be with them all!”