

*“clair  
away  
the  
dogs,  
I’m  
a comin’”*

Between grain harvesting and thrashing there was a slack time for a few days and nearly everybody took a kind of “lay off.” Sometimes we went to the Mississippi for a fishing trip, sometimes bee hunting in the timber, and sometimes just “lazed” around the place and rested up. For several years Pap mentioned taking us all to the woods for a coon hunt. But something

always happened — like a new job, or Pap with fresh rheumatism, or something. But one year we did go.

We had two good dogs, one named John Tyler and the other John Carler. They were regular hounds, with great long ears and a sad look in the face. When George Brown got ready to move to Missouri he gave us a young hound he had bought from a peddler for a silver dollar. This dog was about half grown, just big enough to worry the life out of the old dogs, woozling them around and never giving them a chance to sleep. Pap decided a coon hunt would be good training for the young dog.

One evening a light drizzle struck up about sundown, and Pap said it was just the time to track a coon. So just as it was getting dark we loaded the dogs into the big wagon, piled in, and drove about five miles south, deep into the big woods. We tied the horses to a tree and turned the hounds loose. They went sniffing off into the dark and we wanted to follow them, but Pap made us stay at the wagon 'til the dogs struck a trail. It was as dark as Egypt. We sat there, hardly saying a word, hoping to hear from the dogs.

Within fifteen or twenty minutes we heard old John Tyler let out a bawl, and John Carler joined in. Pap lit the lantern and away we went, as fast as we could through the hazel brush and fallen trees, in the direction of the sounds. We had a lot of faith in Pap's woodsmanship and weren't much scared of getting lost, but we couldn't see our hands before us if we turned down the lantern wick. We went down a long hill, crossed

a running creek, and climbed up a clay bank that was so steep and slick that we had to help one another up. Then we stood still awhile, for the dogs were nearly out of hearing over another big hill and Pap said they would circle back our way.

After a while we could notice the sounds were getting closer, and pretty soon they sounded like they were only about a hundred yards off, and coming right toward us. We asked Pap if a coon would bite anybody, and he told us no, not if we didn't bite the coon. We kept our eyes peeled but didn't see anything of him. We couldn't even see the dogs when they went by.

There may be more exciting sounds than hounds bawling on a hot trail, but I have never heard any. Both old dogs were going it to beat anything, and by that time the young dog had learned how, and was bawling as loud as the others. They trailed that coon away off to the northwest, and then we heard them to the east, coming down the hill on the other side of the creek. So we took after them as fast as we could go, with Pap ahead carrying the lantern and pointing out the rocks and logs so we wouldn't break our fool necks.

Sometimes there would be a lull in the bawling, and Pap said they had lost the trail. We felt disappointed about that, but pretty soon they would find it again and set up a bigger yelping than ever. That coon was a smart one and kept a comfortable distance ahead of the dogs most of the time. When they got too close he waded in the creek for several rods, and the dogs had trouble finding where he came out. That gave him a fresh start.

At last, they treed him — about nine o'clock. Pap knew right away by the change in the sound the hounds made. On the trail they had given out a long bellow — like they were crying about something — but now they barked in short loud yelps.

When we got there all the dogs were squatted under a great big oak tree, looking up and barking.

Pap set the lantern down and went over and put his ear against the side of the tree, and listened. We asked him what he was doing, and he told us he wanted to find out whether it was a coon or a bear. That made us shake in our boots a little, but we believed Pap could kill a bear barefisted if he had to, so we didn't say anything. Pretty soon he straightened up and allowed it was a coon, and went to work to "moon" him, as he called it.

He put the lantern on top of his head and went around the tree, looking at every limb slowly and carefully. Finally he saw the coon on the first limb, which ran about forty feet out and twenty feet up. Then Pap let us "moon" him. Sure enough, there he was — a big fat coon right over our heads and not a chance in the world to get away. We started in to cut down that tree with the short handled axe we had carried along. It was certainly a whopper of a tree. It must have been close to four foot through at the butt, with bark rough as could be. After taking turns for half an hour or so we didn't have more than the bark off one side, and were pretty well winded. Then Pap took a hand, but complained that the axe was a woman's size, and pretty soon he quit. We calculated that it would take a week to cut that tree

down with such an axe, so Pap said he would climb up and shake the coon down.

Pap was a wonderful climber. He was raised in the big timber and had climbed hundreds of big trees. He was strong as a horse and wasn't afraid of anything. He took off his boots and started up the tree. We stood watching for forty minutes or more as Pap inched his way up. Several times he stopped to rest, but he never said a word about being tired. After a long time he got to that first limb, and lapped his fingers around it. But he was too tuckered out to pull himself up on top the limb. So after resting a minute or two he swung himself out into the dark and went overhanding it toward the coon. He looked kind of scary up there, with his long legs dangling down. The dogs were whooping it up, anxious to get a tooth into that coon.

When Pap got out about twenty-five feet he tried to get on top of the limb. Once he got a leg up within a few inches of the limb, but couldn't make it, and had to let down again. He was a heap more fagged than he would admit, and had to give up. Then we heard him say, kind of solemn, "Boys, I believe I better get back to the tree. I'm give out."

We tried our best to get him to go on and shake the coon down. But he knew better than we did and started to overhand it back toward the trunk. We hated to lose that coon after having almost caught him. Before Pap got ten feet along that limb, he stopped and hung there like he was resting. Then we heard him say, "I'm never goin' to make it. I'm give out."

We were scared then, and warned him that it was twenty feet or more to the ground, too far to drop. But it wasn't any use. He was at the end of his rope.

"Clair away the dogs. I'm a comin'."

Before we could any more than get our hands on their collars, he came thrashing down among us. A big hazel bush helped break his fall, but he hit the ground with an awful thud.

Too excited to think, we let the hounds loose. They pounced right onto Pap, bellowing and snarling. The young dog was the worst. He sure did spread himself.

"Take 'em off! Take 'em off!" Pap yelled, all curled up there in the dim light of the lantern, about as near helpless as I ever saw him.

"Pap," Joe answered, "if you could grin and bear it a little longer, it would be the makin' of the young dog."

But in the general scramble and noise, I don't think Pap ever heard the remark. The old dogs soon discovered their mistake and went back to barking up the tree. The young dog, not knowing what else to do, let loose of Pap's britches and went to barking at the tree too.

Pap was considerable "stove up" in his legs and had a gash under one eye where he had hit the hazel bush. But we got him into the wagon, and he drove home. He rubbed a lot of spavin cure all over himself and took a big dose of National Kidney and Liver Cure and went to bed. In a day or two he was all right as far as anybody could see. He was a tough one.

We didn't sleep three winks all night, thinking about that coon. Lying there wide awake as owls, we

planned it all. Next morning at daybreak we were back at that tree, with two good axes and all three dogs. There, at the end of that limb was a big squirrel nest that we had all taken for a coon the night before. It was an awful disappointment not to get that coon.

But we were worse than disappointed in Pap. We had supposed that he could do anything in the world he ever tried, and we hated to find out it wasn't so. But, of course, we never spoke a word to him about it. To do that would have taken a hundred times more grit than any of us had.