



The Last Good Country, Ernest Hemingway

The Last Good Country

“NICKIE,” HIS SISTER SAID TO HIM. “LISTen to me, Nickie.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

He was watching the bottom of the spring where the sand rose in small spurts with the bubbling water. There was a tin cup on a forked stick that was stuck in the gravel by the spring and Nick Adams looked at it and at the water rising and then flowing clear in its gravel bed beside the road.

He could see both ways on the road and he looked up the hill and then down to the dock and the lake, the wooded point across the bay and the open lake beyond where there were white caps running. His back was against a big cedar tree and behind him there was a thick cedar swamp. His sister was sitting on the moss beside him and she had her arm around his shoulders.

“The’re waiting for you to come home to supper,” his sister said.

“There’s two of them. They came in a buggy and they asked where you were.”

“Did anybody tell them?”

“Nobody knew where you were but me. Did you get many, Nickie?”

“I got twenty-six.”

“Are they good ones?”

“Just the size they want for the dinners.”

“Oh, Nickie, I wish you wouldn’t sell them.”

“She gives me a dollar a pound,” Nick Adams said.

His sister was tanned brown and she had dark brown eyes and dark brown hair with yellow streaks in it from the sun. She and Nick loved each other and they did not love the others. They always thought of everyone else in the family as the others.

“They know about everything, Nickie,” his sister said hopelessly. “They said they were going to make an example of you and send you to the reform school.”

“They’ve only got proof on one thing,” Nick told her. “But I guess I have to go away for a while.”

“Can I go?”

“No. I’m sorry, Littless. How much money have we got?”

“Fourteen dollars and sixty-five cents. I brought it.”

“Did they say anything else?”

“No. Only that they were going to stay till you came home.”

“Our mother will get tired of feeding them.”

“She gave them lunch already.”

“What were they doing?”

“Just sitting around on the screen porch. They asked our mother for your rifle but I’d hid it in the woodshed when I saw them by the fence.”

“Were you expecting them?”

“Yes. Weren’t you?”

“I guess so. Goddam them.”

“Goddam them for me, too,” his sister said. “Aren’t I old enough to go now? I hid the rifle. I brought the money.”

“I’d worry about you,” Nick Adams told her. “I don’t even know where I’m going.”

“Sure you do.”

“If there’s two of us they’d look harder. A boy and a girl show up.”

“I’d go like a boy,” she said. “I always wanted to be a boy anyway. They couldn’t tell anything about me if my hair was cut.”

“No,” Nick Adams said. “That’s true.”

“Let’s think something out good,” she said. “Please, Nick, please. I could be lots of use and you’d be lonely without me. Wouldn’t you be?”

“I’m lonely now thinking about going away from you.”

“See? And we may have to be away for years. Who can tell? Take me, Nickie. Please take me.” She kissed him and held onto him with both her arms. Nick Adams looked at her and tried to think straight. It was difficult. But there was no choice.

“I shouldn’t take you. But then I shouldn’t have done any of it,” he said. “I’ll take you. Maybe only for a couple of days, though.”

“That’s all right,” she told him. “When you don’t want me I’ll go straight home. I’ll go home anyway if I’m a bother or a nuisance or an expense.”

“Let’s think it out,” Nick Adams told her. He looked up and down the road and up at the sky where the big high afternoon clouds were riding and at the white caps on the lake out beyond the point.

“I’d go through the woods down to the inn beyond the point and sell her the trout,” he told his sister. “She ordered them for dinners tonight. Right now they want more trout dinners than chicken dinners. I don’t know why. The trout are in good shape. I gutted them and they’re wrapped in cheesecloth and they’ll be cool and fresh. I’ll tell her I’m in some trouble with the game wardens and that they’re looking for me and I have to get out of the country for a while.

I’ll get her to give me a small skillet and some salt and pepper and some bacon and some shortening and some com meal. I’ll get her to give me a sack to put everything in and I’ll get some dried apricots and some prunes and some tea and plenty of matches and a hatchet. But I can only get one blanket. She’ll help me because buying trout is just as bad as selling them.”

“I can get a blanket,” his sister said. “I’ll wrap it around the rifle and I’ll bring your moccasins and my moccasins and I’ll change to different overalls and a shirt and hide these so they’ll think I’m wearing them and I’ll bring soap and a comb and a pair of scissors and something to sew with and Lorna Doone and Swiss Family Robinson.”

“Bring all the .22’s you can find,” Nick Adams said. Then quickly, “Come on back. Get out of sight.” He had seen a buggy coming down the road.

Behind the cedars they lay flat against the springy moss with their faces down and heard the soft noise of the horses' hooves in the sand and the small noise of the wheels. Neither of the men in the buggy was talking but Nick Adams smelled them as they went past and he smelled the sweated horses. He sweated himself until they were well past on their way to the dock because he thought they might stop to water at the spring or to get a drink.

"Is that them, Littless?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

"Crawl way back in," Nick Adams said. He crawled back into the swamp, pulling his sack of fish. The swamp was mossy and not muddy there. Then he stood up and hid the sack behind the trunk of a cedar and motioned the girl to come further in. They went into the cedar swamp, moving as softly as deer.

"I know the one," Nick Adams said. "He's a no good son of a bitch."

"He said he'd been after you for four years."

"I know."

"The other one, the big one with the spit tobacco face and the blue suit, is the one from down state."

"Good," Nick said. "Now we've had a look at them I better get going. Can you get home all right?"

"Sure. I'll cut up to the top of the hill and keep off the road. Where will I meet you tonight, Nickie?"

"I don't think you ought to come, Littless."

“I’ve got to come. You don’t know how it is. I can leave a note for our mother and say I went with you and you’ll take good care of me.”

“All right,” Nick Adams said. “I’ll be where the big hemlock is that was struck by lightning. The one that’s down. Straight up from the cove. Do you know the one? On the short cut to the road.”

“That’s awfully close to the house.”

“I don’t want you to have to carry the stuff too far.”

“I’ll do what you say. But don’t take chances, Nickie.”

“I’d like to have the rifle and go down now to the edge of the timber and kill both of those bastards while they’re on the dock and wire a piece of iron on them from the old mill and sink them in the channel.”

“And then what would you do?” his sister asked. “Somebody sent them.”

“Nobody sent that first son of a bitch.”

“But you killed the moose and you sold the trout and you killed what they took from your boat.”

“That was all right to kill that.”

He did not like to mention what that was, because that was the proof they had.

“I know. But you’re not going to kill people and that’s why I’m going with you.”

“Let’s stop talking about it. But I’d like to kill those two sons of bitches.”

"I know," she said. "So would I. But we're not going to kill people, Nickie. Will you promise me?"

"No. Now I don't know whether it's safe to take her the trout."

"I'll take them to her."

"No. They're too heavy. I'll take them through the swamp and to the woods in back of the hotel. You go straight to the hotel and see if she's there and if everything's all right. And if it is you'll find me there by the big basswood tree."

"It's a long way there through the swamp, Nicky."

"It's a long way back from reform school, too."

"Can't I come with you through the swamp? I'll go in then and see her while you stay out and come back out with you and take them in."

"All right," Nick said. "But I wish you'd do it the other way."

"Why, Nickie?"

"Because you'll see them maybe on the road and you can tell me where they've gone. I'll see you in the second-growth wood lot in back of the hotel where the big basswood is."

Nick waited more than an hour in the second-growth timber and his sister had not come. When she came she was excited and he knew she was tired.

"They're at our house," she said. "They're sitting out on the screen porch and drinking whiskey and ginger ale and they've unhitched and

put their horses up. They say they're going to wait till you come back. It was our mother told them you'd gone fishing at the creek. I don't think she meant to. Anyway I hope not."

"What about Mrs. Packard?"

"I saw her in the kitchen of the hotel and she asked me if I'd seen you and I said no. She said she was waiting for you to bring her some fish for tonight. She was worried. You might as well take them in."

"Good," he said. "They're nice and fresh. I repacked them in ferns."

"Can I come in with you?"

"Sure," Nick said.

The hotel was a long wooden building with a porch that fronted on the lake. There were wide wooden steps that led down to the pier that ran far out into the water and there were natural cedar railings alongside the steps and natural cedar railings around the porch. There were chairs made of natural cedar on the porch and in them sat middle-aged people wearing white clothes.

There were three pipes set on the lawn with spring water bubbling out of them, and little paths led to them. The water tasted like rotten eggs because these were mineral springs and Nick and his sister used to drink from them as a matter of discipline. Now coming toward the rear of the hotel, where the kitchen was, they crossed a plank bridge over a small brook running into the lake beside the hotel, and slipped into the back door of the kitchen.

“Wash them and put them in the ice box, Nickie,” Mrs. Packard said.
“I’ll weigh them later.”

“Mrs. Packard,” Nick said. “Could I speak to you a minute?”

“Speak up,” she said. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“If I could have the money now.”

Mrs. Packard was a handsome woman in a gingham apron. She had a beautiful complexion and she was very busy and her kitchen help were there as well.

“You don’t mean you want to sell trout. Don’t you know that’s against the law?”

“I know,” Nick said. “I brought you the fish for a present. I mean my time for the wood I split and corded.”

“I’ll get it,” she said. “I have to go to the annex.”

Nick and his sister followed her outside. On the board sidewalk that led to the icehouse from the kitchen she stopped and put her hands in her apron pocket and took out a pocketbook.

“You get out of here,” she said quickly and kindly. “And get out of here fast. How much do you need?”

“I’ve got sixteen dollars,” Nick said.

“Take twenty,” she told him. “And keep that tyke out of trouble. Let her go home and keep an eye on them until you’re clear.”

“When did you hear about them?”

She shook her head at him.

“Buying is as bad or worse than selling,” she said. “You stay away until things quiet down. Nickie, you’re a good boy no matter what anybody says. You see Packard if things get bad. Come here nights if you need anything. I sleep light. Just knock on the window.”

“You aren’t going to serve them tonight are you, Mrs. Packard? You’re not going to serve them for the dinners?”

“No,” she said. “But I’m not going to waste them. Packard can eat half a dozen and I know other people that can. Be careful, Nickie, and let it blow over. Keep out of sight.”

“Littless wants to go with me.”

“Don’t you dare take her,” Mrs. Packard said. “You come by tonight and I’ll have some stuff made up for you.”

“Could you let me take a skillet?”

“I’ll have what you need. Packard knows what you need. I don’t give you any more money so you’ll keep out of trouble.”

“I’d like to see Mr. Packard about getting a few things.”

“He’ll get you anything you need. But don’t you go near the store, Nick.”

“I’ll get Littless to take him a note.”

“Anytime you need anything,” Mrs. Packard said. “Don’t you worry. Packard will be studying things out.”

“Good-bye, Aunt Halley.”

“Good-bye,” she said and kissed him. She smelt wonderful when she kissed him. It was the way the kitchen smelled when they were baking. Mrs. Packard smelled like her kitchen and her kitchen always smelled good.

“Don’t worry and don’t do anything bad.”

“I’ll be all right.”

“Of course,” she said. “And Packard will figure out something.”

They were in the big hemlocks on the hill behind the house now. It was evening and the sun was down beyond the hills on the other side of the lake.

“I’ve found everything,” his sister said. “It’s going to make a pretty big pack, Nickie.”

“I know it. What are they doing?”

“They ate a big supper and now they’re sitting out on the porch and drinking. They’re telling each other stories about how smart they are.”

“They aren’t very smart so far.”

“They’re going to starve you out,” his sister said. “A couple of nights in the woods and you’ll be back. You hear a loon holler a couple of times when you got an empty stomach and you’ll be back.”

“What did our mother give them for supper?”

“Awful,” his sister said.

“Good.”

“I’ve located everything on the list. Our mother’s gone to bed with a sick headache. She wrote our father.”

“Did you see the letter?”

“No. It’s in her room with the list of stuff to get from the store tomorrow. She’s going to have to make a new list when she finds everything is gone in the morning.”

“How much are they drinking?”

“They’ve drunk about a bottle, I guess.”

“I wish we could put knockout drops in it.”

“I could put them in if you’ll tell me how. Do you put them in the bottle?”

“No. In the glass. But we haven’t got any.”

“Would there be any in the medicine cabinet?”

“No.”

“I could put paregoric in the bottle. They have another bottle. Or calomel. I know we’ve got those.”

“No,” said Nick. “You try to get me about half the other bottle when they’re asleep. Put it in any old medicine bottle.”

“I better go and watch them,” his sister said. “My, I wish we had knockout drops. I never even heard of them.”

“They aren’t really drops,” Nick told her. “It’s chloral hydrate. Whores give it to lumberjacks in their drinks when they’re going to jack roll them.”

“It sounds pretty bad,” his sister said. “But we probably ought to have some for in emergencies.”

“Let me kiss you,” her brother said. “Just for in an emergency. Let’s go down and watch them drinking. I’d like to hear them talk sitting in our own house.”

“Will you promise not to get angry and do anything bad?”

“Sure.”

“Nor to the horses. It’s not the horses’ fault.”

“Not the horses either.”

“I wish we had knockout drops,” his sister said loyally.

“Well, we haven’t,” Nick told her. “I guess there aren’t any this side of Boyne City.”

They sat in the woodshed and they watched the two men sitting at the table on the screen porch. The moon had not risen and it was dark, but the outlines of the men showed against the lightness that the lake made behind them. They were not talking now but were both leaning forward on the table. Then Nick heard the clink of ice against a bucket.

“The ginger ale’s gone,” one of the men said.

“I said it wouldn’t last,” the other said. “But you were the one said we had plenty.”

“Get some water. There’s a pail and a dipper in the kitchen.”

“I’ve drunk enough. I’m going to turn in.”

“Aren’t you going to stay up for that kid?”

“No. I’m going to get some sleep. You stay up.”

“Do you think he’ll come in tonight?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to get some sleep. You wake me when you get sleepy.”

“I can stay up all night,” the local warden said. “Many’s the night I’ve stayed up all night for jack lighters and never shut an eye.”

“Me, too,” the down-state man said. “But now I’m going to get a little sleep.”

Nick and his sister watched him go in the door. Their mother had told the two men they could sleep in the bedroom next to the living room. They saw when he struck a match. Then the window was dark again. They watched the other warden sitting at the table until he put his head on his arms. Then they heard him snoring.

“We’ll give him a little while to make sure he’s solid asleep. Then we’ll get the stuff,” Nick said.

“You get over outside the fence,” his sister said. “It doesn’t matter if I’m moving around. But he might wake up and see you.”

“All right,” Nick agreed. “I’ll get everything out of here. Most of it’s here.”

“Can you find everything without a light?”

“Sure. Where’s the rifle?”

“Flat on the back upper rafter. Don’t slip or make the wood fall down. Nick.”

“Don’t you worry.”

She came out to the fence at the far corner where Nick was making up his pack beyond the big hemlock that had been struck by lightning the summer before and had fallen in a storm that autumn. The moon was just rising now behind the far hills and enough moonlight came through the trees for Nick to see clearly what he was packing. His sister put down the sack she was carrying and said, “They’re sleeping like pigs, Nickie.”

“Good.”

“The down-state one was snoring just like the one outside. I think I got everything.”

“You good old Littless.”

“I wrote a note to our mother and told her I was going with you to keep you out of trouble and not to tell anybody and that you’d take good care of me. I put it under her door. It’s locked.”

“Oh, shit,” Nick said. Then he said, “I’m sorry, Littless.”

“Now it’s not your fault and I can’t make it worse for you.”

“You’re awful.”

“Can’t we be happy now?”

“Sure.”

"I brought the whiskey," she said hopefully. "I left some in the bottle. One of them can't be sure the other didn't drink it. Anyway they have another bottle."

"Did you bring a blanket for you?"

"Of course."

"We better get going."

"We're all right if we're going where I think. The only thing that makes the pack bigger is my blanket. I'll carry the rifle."

"All right. What kind of shoes have you?"

"I've got my work-moccasins."

"What did you bring to read?"

"Lorna Doone and Kidnapped and Wuthering Heights."

"They're all too old for you but Kidnapped."

"Lorna Doone isn't."

"We'll read it out loud," Nick said. "That way it lasts longer. But, Littless, you've made things sort of hard now and we better go. Those bastards can't be as stupid as they act. Maybe it was just because they were drinking."

Nick had rolled the pack now and tightened the straps and he sat back and put his moccasins on. He put his arm around his sister. "You sure you want to go?"

"I have to go, Nickie. Don't be weak and indecisive now. I left the note."

"All right," Nick said. "Let's go. You can take the rifle until you get tired of it."

"I'm all ready to go," his sister said. "Let me help you strap the pack."

"You know you haven't had any sleep at all and that we have to travel?"

"I know. I'm really like the snoring one at the table says he was."

"Maybe he was that way once, too," Nick said. "But what you have to do is keep your feet in good shape. Do the moccasins chafe?"

"No. And my feet are tough from going barefoot all summer."

"Mine are good, too," said Nick. "Come on. Let's go."

They started off walking on the soft hemlock needles and the trees were high and there was no brush between the tree trunks. They walked uphill and the moon came through the trees and showed Nick with the very big pack and his sister carrying the .22 rifle. When they were at the top of the hill they looked back and saw the lake in the moonlight. It was clear enough so they could see the dark point, and beyond were the high hills of the far shore.

"We might as well say good-bye to it," Nick Adams said.

"Good-bye, lake," Littleless said. "I love you, too."

They went down the hill and across the long field and through the orchard and then through a rail fence and into a field of stubble. Going through the stubble field they looked to the right and saw the slaughterhouse and the big barn in the hollow and the old log farmhouse on the other high land that overlooked the lake. The long road of Lombardy poplars that ran to the lake was in the moonlight.

“Does it hurt your feet, Littless?” Nick asked.

“No,” his sister said.

“I came this way on account of the dogs,” Nick said. “They’d shut up as soon as they knew it was us. But somebody might hear them bark.”

“I know,” she said. “And as soon as they shut up afterwards they’d know it was us.”

Ahead they could see the dark of the rising line of hills beyond the road. They came to the end of one cut field of grain and crossed the little sunken creek that ran down to the springhouse. Then they climbed across the rise of another stubble field and there was another rail fence and the sandy road with the second-growth timber solid beyond it.

“Wait till I climb over and I’ll help you,” Nick said. “I want to look at the road.”

From the top of the fence he saw the roll of the country and the dark timber by their own house and the brightness of the lake in the moonlight. Then he was looking at the road.

“They can’t track us the way we’ve come and I don’t think they would notice tracks in this deep sand,” he said to his sister. “We can keep to the two sides of the road if it isn’t too scratchy.”

“Nickie, honestly I don’t think they’re intelligent enough to track anybody. Look how they just waited for you to come back and then practically got drunk before supper and afterwards.”

“They came down to the dock,” Nick said. “That was where I was. If you hadn’t told me they would have picked me up.”

“They didn’t have to be so intelligent to figure you would be on the big creek when our mother let them know you might have gone fishing. After I left they must have found all the boats were there and that would make them think you were fishing the creek. Everybody knows you usually fish below the grist mill and the cider mill. They were just slow thinking it out.”

“All right,” Nick said. “But they were awfully close then.”

His sister handed him the rifle through the fence, butt toward him, and then crawled between the rails. She stood beside him on the road and he put his hand on her head and stroked it.

“Are you awfully tired, Littless?”

“No. I’m fine. I’m too happy to be tired.”

“Until you’re too tired you walk in the sandy part of the road when; their horses made holes in the sand. It’s so soft and dry tracks won’t show and I’ll walk on the side where it’s hard.”

“I can walk on the side, too.”

“No. I don’t want you to get scratched.”

They climbed, but with constant small descents, toward the height of land that separated the two lakes. There was close, heavy, second-growth timber on both sides of the road and blackberry and raspberry bushes grew from the edge of the road to the timber. Ahead they could see the top of each hill as a notch in the timber. The moon was well on its way down now.

“How do you feel, Littless?” Nick asked his sister.

"I feel wonderful. Nickie, is it always this nice when you run away from home?"

"No. Usually it's lonesome."

"How lonesome have you ever been?"

"Bad black lonesome. Awful."

"Do you think you'll get lonesome with me?"

"No."

"You don't mind you're with me instead of going to Trudy?"

"What do you talk about her for all the time?"

"I haven't been. Maybe you were thinking about her and you thought I was talking."

"You're too smart," Nick said. "I thought about her because you told me where she was and when I knew where she was I wondered what she would be doing and all that."

"I guess I shouldn't have come."

"I told you that you shouldn't have come."

"Oh, hell," his sister said. "Are we going to be like the others and have fights? I'll go back now. You don't have to have me."

"Shut up," Nick said.

"Please don't say that, Nickie. I'll go back or I'll stay just as you want. I'll go back whenever you tell me to. But I won't have fights. Haven't we seen enough fights in families?"

"Yes," said Nick.

“I know I forced you to take me. But I fixed it so you wouldn’t get in trouble about it. And I did keep them from catching you.”

They had reached the height of land and from here they could see the lake again although from here it looked narrow now and almost like a big river.

“We cut across country here,” Nick said. “Then we’ll hit that old logging road. Here’s where you go back from if you want to go back.”

He took off his pack and put it back into the timber and his sister leaned the rifle on it.

“Sit down, Littless, and take a rest,” he said. “We’re both tired.”

Nick lay with his head on the pack and his sister lay by him with her head on his shoulder.

“I’m not going back, Nickie, unless you tell me to,” she said. “I just don’t want fights. Promise me we won’t have fights?”

“Promise.”

“I won’t talk about Trudy.”

“The hell with Trudy.”

“I want to be useful and a good partner.”

“You are. You won’t mind if I get restless and mix it up with being lonesome?”

“No. We’ll take good care of each other and have fun. We can have a lovely time.”

“All right. We’ll start to have it now.”

“I’ve been having it all the time.”

“We just have one pretty hard stretch and then a really hard stretch and then we’ll be there. We might as well wait until it gets light to start. You go to sleep, Littless. Are you warm enough?”

“Oh, yes, Nickie. I’ve got my sweater.”

She curled up beside him and was asleep. In a little while Nick was sleeping, too. He slept for two hours until the morning light woke him.

Nick had circled around through the second-growth timber until they had come onto the old logging road.

“We couldn’t leave tracks going into it from the main road,” he told his sister.

The old road was so overgrown that he had to stoop many times to avoid hitting branches.

“It’s like a tunnel,” his sister said.

“It opens up after a while.”

“Have I ever been here before?”

“No. This goes up way beyond where I ever took you hunting.”

“Does it come out on the secret place?”

“No, Littless. We have to go through some long bad slashings. Nobody gets in where we’re going.”

They kept on along the road and then took another road that was even more overgrown. Then they came out into a clearing. There was

fireweed and brush in the clearing and the old cabins of the logging camp. They were very old and some of the roofs had fallen in. But there was a spring by the road and they both drank at it. The sun wasn't up yet and they both felt hollow and empty in the early morning after the night of walking.

"All this beyond was hemlock forest," Nick said. "They only cut it for the bark and they never used the logs."

"But what happens to the road?"

"They must have cut up at the far end first and hauled and piled the bark by the road to snake it out. Then finally they cut everything right to the road and piled the bark here and then pulled out."

"Is the secret place beyond all this slashing?"

"Yes. We go through the slashing and then some more road and then another slashing and then we come to virgin timber."

"How did they leave it when they cut all this?"

"I don't know. It belonged to somebody that wouldn't sell, I guess. They stole a lot from the edges and paid stumpage on it. But the good part's still there and there isn't any passable road into it."

"But why can't people go down the creek? The creek has to come from somewhere?"

They were resting before they started the bad traveling through the slashing and Nick wanted to explain.

“Look, Littless. The creek crosses the main road we were on and it goes through a farmer’s land. The farmer has it fenced for a pasture and he runs people off that want to fish. So they stop at the bridge on his land. On the section of the creek where they would hit if they cut across his pasture on the other side from his house he runs a bull. The bull is mean and he really runs everybody off.

He’s the meanest bull I ever saw and he just stays there, mean all the time, and hunts for people. Then after him the farmer’s land ends and there’s a section of cedar swamp with sink holes and you’d have to know it to get through. And then, even if you know it, it’s bad. Below that is the secret place. We’re going in over the hills and sort of in the back way. Then below the secret place there’s real swamp. Bad swamp that you can’t get through. Now we better start the bad part.”

The bad part and the part that was worse were behind them now. Nick had climbed over many logs that were higher than his head and others that were up to his waist. He would take the rifle and lay it down on the top of the log and pull his sister up and then she would slide down on the far side or he would lower himself down and take the rifle and help the girl down.

They went over and around piles of brush and it was hot in the slashing, and the pollen from the ragweed and the fireweed dusted the girl’s hair and made her sneeze.

“Damn slashings,” she said to Nick. They were resting on top of a big log ringed where they sat by the cutting of the barkpeelers. The ring was gray in the rotting gray log and all around were other long gray trunks

and gray brush and branches with the brilliant and worthless seeds growing.

"This is the last one," Nick said.

"I hate them," his sister said. "And the damn weeds are like flowers in a tree cemetery if nobody took care of it."

"You see why I didn't want to try to make it in the dark."

"We couldn't."

"No. And nobody's going to chase us through here. Now we come into the good part."

They came from the hot sun of the slashings into the shade of the great trees. The slashings had run up to the top of a ridge and over and then the forest began. They were walking on the brown forest floor now and it was springy and cool under their feet. There was no underbrush and the trunks of the trees rose sixty feet high before there were any branches.

It was cool in the shade of the trees and high up in them Nick could hear the breeze that was rising. No sun came through as they walked and Nick knew there would be no sun through the high top branches until nearly noon. His sister put her hand in his and walked close to him.

"I'm not scared, Nickie. But it makes me feel very strange."

"Me, too," Nick said. "Always." "I never was in woods like these."

"This is all the virgin timber left around here."

"Do we go through it very long?" "Quite a way."

"I'd be afraid if I were alone."

"It makes me feel strange. But I'm not afraid."

"I said that first."

"I know. Maybe we say it because we are afraid."

"No. I'm not afraid because I'm with you. But I know I'd be afraid alone. Did you ever come here with anyone else?"

"No. Only by myself."

"And you weren't afraid?"

"No. But I always feel strange. Like the way I ought to feel in church."

"Nickie, where we're going to live isn't as solemn as this, is it?"

"No. Don't you worry. There it's cheerful. You just enjoy this, Littless. This is good for you. This is the way forests were in the olden days. This is about the last good country there is left. Nobody gets in here ever."

"I love the olden days. But I wouldn't want it all this solemn."

"It wasn't all solemn. But the hemlock forests were."

"It's wonderful walking. I thought behind our house was wonderful. But this is better. Nickie, do you believe in God? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I don't know."

"All right. You don't have to say it. But you don't mind if I say my prayers at night?"

"No. I'll remind you if you forget."

"Thank you. Because this kind of woods makes me feel awfully religious."

“That’s why they build cathedrals to be like this.”

“You’ve never seen a cathedral, have you?”

“No. But I’ve read about them and I can imagine them. This is the best one we have around here.”

“Do you think we can go to Europe some time and see cathedrals?”

“Sure we will. But first I have to get out of this trouble and learn how to make some money.”

“Do you think you’ll ever make money writing?”

“If I get good enough.”

“Couldn’t you maybe make it if you wrote cheerfuller things? That isn’t my opinion. Our mother said everything you write is morbid.”

“It’s too morbid for the St. Nicholas,” Nick said. “They didn’t say it. But they didn’t like it.”

“But the St. Nicholas is our favorite magazine.”

“I know,” said Nick. “But I’m too morbid for it already. And I’m not even grown-up.”

“When is a man grown-up? When he’s married?”

“No. Until you’re grown-up they send you to reform school. After you’re grown-up they send you to the penitentiary.”

“I’m glad you’re not grown-up then.”

“They’re not going to send me anywhere,” Nick said. “And let’s not talk morbid even if I write morbid.”

“I didn’t say it was morbid.”

“I know. Everybody else does, though.”

“Let’s be cheerful, Nickie,” his sister said. “These woods make us too solemn.”

“We’ll be out of them pretty soon,” Nick told her. “Then you’ll see where we’re going to live. Are you hungry, Littless?”

“A little.”

“I’ll bet,” Nick said. “We’ll eat a couple of apples.”

They were coming down a long hill when they saw sunlight ahead through the tree trunks. Now, at the edge of the timber, there was wintergreen growing and some partridgeberries and the forest floor began to be alive with growing things. Through the tree trunks they saw an open meadow that sloped to where white birches grew along the stream.

Below the meadow and the line of the birches there was the dark green of a cedar swamp and far beyond the swamp there were dark blue hills. There was an arm of the lake between the swamp and the hills. But from here they could not see it. They only felt from the distances that it was there.

“Here’s the spring,” Nick said to his sister. “And here’s the stones where I camped before.”

“It’s a beautiful, beautiful place, Nickie,” his sister said. “Can we see the lake, too?”

“There’s a place where we can see it. But it’s better to camp here. I’ll get some wood and we’ll make breakfast.”

“The firestones are very old.”

“It’s a very old place,” Nick said. “The firestones are Indian.”

“How did you come to it straight through the woods with no trail and no blazes?”

“Didn’t you see the direction sticks on the three ridges?”

“No.”

“I’ll show them to you sometime.”

“Are they yours?”

“No. They’re from the old days.”

“Why didn’t you show them to me?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. “I was showing off I guess.”

“Nickie, they’ll never find us here.”

“I hope not,” Nick said.

At about the time that Nick and his sister were entering the first of the slashings the warden who was sleeping on the screen porch of the house that stood in the shade of the trees above the lake was wakened by the sun that, rising above the slope of open land behind the house, shone full on his face.

During the night the warden had gotten up for a drink of water and when he had come back from the kitchen he had lain down on the floor with a cushion from one of the chairs for a pillow. Now he waked, realized where he was, and got to his feet. He had slept on his right side

because he had a .38 Smith and Wesson revolver in a shoulder holster under his left armpit. Now, awake, he felt for the gun, looked away from the sun, which hurt his eyes, and went into the kitchen where he dipped up a drink of water from the pail beside the kitchen table. The hired girl was building a fire in the stove and the warden said to her, "What about some breakfast?"

"No breakfast," she said. She slept in a cabin out behind the house and had come into the kitchen a half an hour before. The sight of the warden lying on the floor of the screen porch and the nearly empty bottle of whiskey on the table had frightened and disgusted her. Then it had made her angry.

"What do you mean, no breakfast?" the warden said, still holding the dipper.

"Just that."

"Why?"

"Nothing to eat."

"What about coffee?"

"No coffee."

"Tea?"

"No tea. No bacon. No corn meal. No salt. No pepper. No coffee. No Borden's canned cream. No Aunt Jemima buckwheat flour. No nothing."

"What are you talking about? There was plenty to eat last night."

“There isn’t now. Chipmunks must have carried it away.”

The warden from down state had gotten up when he heard them talking and had come into the kitchen.

“How do you feel this morning?” the hired girl asked him.

The warden ignored the hired girl and said, “What is it, Evans?”

“That son of a bitch came in here last night and got himself a pack load of grub.”

“Don’t you swear in my kitchen,” the hired girl said.

“Come out here,” The down-state warden said. They both went out on the screen porch and shut the kitchen door.

“What does that mean, Evans?” The down-state man pointed at the quart of Old Green River which had less than a quarter left in it. “How skunk-drunk were you?”

“I drank the same as you. I sat up by the table—”

“Doing what?”

“Waiting for the goddam Adams boy if he showed.”

“And drinking.”

“Not drinking. Then I got up and went in the kitchen and got a drink of water about half past four and I lay down here in front of the door to take it easier.”

“Why didn’t you lie down in front of the kitchen door?”

“I could see him better from here if he came.”

“So what happened?”

“He must have come in the kitchen, through a window maybe, and loaded that stuff.”

“Bullshit.”

“What were you doing?” the local warden asked.

“I was sleeping the same as you.”

“Okay. Let’s quit fighting about it. That doesn’t do any good.”

“Tell that hired girl to come out here.”

The hired girl came out and the down-state man said to her, “You tell Mrs. Adams we want to speak to her.”

The hired girl did not say anything but went into the main part of the house, shutting the door after her.

“You better pick up the full and the empty bottles,” the down-state man said. “There isn’t enough of this to do any good. You want a drink of it?”

“No thanks. I’ve got to work today.”

“I’ll take one,” the down-state man said. “It hasn’t been shared right.”

“I didn’t drink any of it after you left,” the local warden said doggedly.

“Why do you keep on with that bullshit?”

“It isn’t bullshit.”

The down-state man put the bottle down. “All right,” he said to the hired girl, who had opened and shut the door behind her. “What did she say?”

“She has a sick headache and she can’t see you. She says you have a warrant. She says for you to search the place if you want to and then go.”

“What did she say about the boy?”

“She hasn’t seen the boy and she doesn’t know anything about him.”

“Where are the other kids?”

“They’re visiting at Charlevoix.”

“Who are they visiting?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t know. They went to the dance and they were going to stay over Sunday with friends.”

“Who was that kid that was around here yesterday?”

“I didn’t see any kid around here yesterday.”

“There was.”

“Maybe some friend of the children asking for them. Maybe some resorter’s kid. Was it a boy or a girl?”

“A girl about eleven or twelve. Brown hair and brown eyes. Freckles. Very tanned. Wearing overalls and a boy’s shirt. Barefooted.”

“Sounds like anybody,” the girl said. “Did you say eleven or twelve years old?”

“Oh, shit,” said the man from down state. “You can’t get anything out of these mossbacks.”

"If I'm a mossback what's he?" The hired girl looked at the local warden. "What's Mr. Evans? His kids and me went to the same schoolhouse."

"Who was the girl?" Evans asked her. "Come on, Suzy. I can find out anyway."

"I wouldn't know," Suzy, the hired girl, said. "It seems like all kinds of people come by here now. I just feel like I'm in a big city."

"You don't want to get in any trouble, do you, Suzy?" Evans said.

"No, sir."

"I mean it."

"You don't want to get in any trouble either, do you?" Suzy asked him.

Out at the barn after they were hitched up the down-state man said, "We didn't do so good, did we?"

"He's loose now," Evans said. "He's got grub and he must have his rifle. But he's still in the area. I can get him. Can you track?"

"No. Not really. Can you?"

"In snow," the other warden laughed.

"But we don't have to track. We have to think out where he'll be."

"He didn't load up with all that stuff to go south. He'd just take a little something and head for the railway."

"I couldn't tell what was missing from the woodshed. But he had a big pack load from the kitchen. He's heading in somewhere. I got to check on all his habits and his friends and where he used to go. You block him off at Charlevoix and Petoskey and St. Ignace and Sheboygan. Where would you go if you were him?"

“I’d go to the Upper Peninsula.”

“Me, too. He’s been up there, too. The ferry is the easiest place to pick him up. But there’s an awful big country between here and Sheboygan and he knows that country, too.”

“We better go down and see Packard. We were going to check that today.”

“What’s to prevent him going down by East Jordan and Grand Traverse?”

“Nothing. But that isn’t his country. He’ll go some place that he knows.”

Suzy came out when they were opening the gate in the fence.

“Can I ride down to the store with you? I’ve got to get some groceries.”

“What makes you think we’re going to the store?”

“Yesterday you were talking about going to see Mr. Packard.”

“How are you going to get your groceries back?”

“I guess I can get a lift with somebody on the road or coming up the lake. This is Saturday.”

“All right. Climb up,” the local warden said.

“Thank you, Mr. Evans,” Suzy said.

At the general store and post office Evans hitched the team at the rack and he and the down-state man stood and talked before they went in.

“I couldn’t say anything with that damned Suzy.”

“Sure.”

“Packard’s a fine man. There isn’t anybody better-liked in this country. You’d never get a conviction on that trout business against him. Nobody’s going to scare him and we don’t want to antagonize him.”

“Do you think he’ll cooperate?”

“Not if you act rough.”

“We’ll go see him.”

Inside the store Suzy had gone straight through past the glass showcases, the opened barrels, the boxes, the shelves of canned goods, seeing nothing nor anyone until she came to the post office with its lockboxes and its general delivery and stamp window. The window was down and she went straight on to the back of the store. Mr. Packard was opening a packing box with a crowbar. He looked at her and smiled.

“Mr. John,” the hired girl said, speaking very fast. “There’s two wardens coming in that’s after Nickie. He cleared out last night and his kid sister’s gone with him. Don’t let on about that. His mother knows it and it’s all right. Anyhow she isn’t going to say anything.”

“Did he take all your groceries?”

“Most of them.”

“You pick out what you need and make a list and I’ll check it over with you.”

“They’re coming in now.”

“You go out the back and come in the front again. I’ll go and talk to them.”

Suzy walked around the long frame building and climbed the front steps again. This time she noticed everything as she came in. She knew the Indians who had brought in the baskets and she knew the two Indian boys who were looking at the fishing tackle in the first showcases on the left. She knew all the patent medicines in the next case and who usually bought them.

She had clerked one summer in the store and she knew what the penciled code letters and numbers meant that were on the cardboard boxes that held shoes, winter overshoes, wool socks, mittens, caps and sweaters. She knew what the baskets were worth that the Indians had brought in and that it was too late in the season for them to bring a good price.

“Why did you bring them in so late, Mrs. Tabeshaw?” she asked.

“Too much fun Fourth of July,” the Indian woman laughed.

“How’s Billy?” Suzy asked.

“I don’t know, Suzy. I no see him four weeks now.”

“Why don’t you take them down to the hotel and try to sell them to the resorters?” Suzy said.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Tabeshaw said. “I took once.”

“You ought to take them every day.”

“Long walk,” Mrs. Tabeshaw said.

While Suzy was talking to the people she knew and making a list of what she needed for the house the two wardens were in the back of the store with Mr. John Packard.

Mr. John had gray-blue eyes and dark hair and a dark mustache and he always looked as though he had wandered into a general store by mistake. He had been away from northern Michigan once for eighteen years when he was a young man and he looked more like a peace officer or an honest gambler than a storekeeper. He had owned good saloons in his time and run them well. But when the country had been lumbered off he had stayed and bought farming land.

Finally when the county had gone local option he had bought this store. He already owned the hotel. But he said he didn't like a hotel without a bar and so he almost never went near it. Mrs. Packard ran the hotel. She was more ambitious than Mr. John and Mr. John said he didn't want to waste time with people who had enough money to take a vacation anywhere in the country they wanted and then came to a hotel without a bar and spent their time sitting on the porch in rocking chairs. He called the resorters "change-of-lifers" and he made fun of them to Mrs. Packard but she loved him and never minded when he teased her.

"I don't mind if you call them change-of-lifers," she told him one night in bed. "I had the damn thing but I'm still all the woman you can handle, aren't I?"

She liked the resorters because some of them brought culture and Mr. John said she loved culture like a lumberjack loved Peerless, the great chewing tobacco. He really respected her love of culture because she said she loved it just like he loved good bonded whiskey and she said, "Packard, you don't have to care about culture. I won't bother you with it. But it makes me feel wonderful."

Mr. John said she could have culture until hell wouldn't hold it just so long as he never had to go to a Chautauqua or a Self-Betterment

Course. He had been to camp meetings and a revival but he had never been to a Chautauqua.

He said a camp meeting or a revival was bad enough but at least there was some sexual intercourse afterwards by those who got really aroused although he never knew anyone to pay their bills after a camp meeting or a revival. Mrs. Packard, he told Nick Adams, would get worried about the salvation of his immortal soul after she had been to a big revival by somebody like Gypsy Smith, that great evangelist, but finally it would turn out that he, Packard, looked like Gypsy Smith and everything would be fine finally.

But a Chautauqua was something strange. Culture maybe was better than religion, Mr. John thought. But it was a cold proposition. Still they were crazy for it. He could see it was more than a fad, though.

“It’s sure got a hold on them,” he had told Nick Adams. “It must be sort of like the Holy Rollers only in the brain. You study it sometime and tell me what you think. You going to be a writer you ought to get in on it early. Don’t let them get too far ahead of you.”

Mr. John liked Nick Adams because he said he had original sin. Nick did not understand this but he was proud.

“You’re going to have things to repent, boy,” Mr. John had told Nick. “That’s one of the best things there is. You can always decide whether to repent them or not. But the thing is to have them.”

“I don’t want to do anything bad,” Nick had said.

"I don't want you to," Mr. John had said. "But you're alive and you're going to do things. Don't you lie and don't you steal. Everybody has to lie. But you pick out somebody you never lie to."

"I'll pick out you."

"That's right. Don't you ever lie to me no matter what and I won't lie to you."

"I'll try," Nick had said.

"That isn't it," Mr. John said. "It has to be absolute."

"All right," Nick said. "I'll never lie to you."

"What became of your girl?"

"Somebody said she was working up at the Soo."

"She was a beautiful girl and I always liked her," Mr. John had said.

"So did I," Nick said.

"Try and not feel too bad about it."

"I can't help it," Nick said. "None of it was her fault. She's just built that way. If I ran into her again I guess I'd get mixed up with her again."

"Maybe not."

"Maybe too. I'd try not to."

Mr. John was thinking about Nick when he went out to the back counter where the two men were waiting for him. He looked them over as he stood there and he didn't like either of them. He had always disliked the local man Evans and had no respect for him but he sensed that the downstate man was dangerous. He had not analyzed it yet but

he saw the man had very flat eyes and a mouth that was tighter than a simple tobacco chewer's mouth needed to be.

He had a real elk's tooth too on his watch chain. It was a really fine tusk from about a five-year-old bull. It was a beautiful tusk and Mr. John looked at it again and at the over-large bulge the man's shoulder holster made under his coat.

"Did you kill that bull with that cannon you're carrying around under your arm?" Mr. John asked the down-state man.

The down-state man looked at Mr. John unappreciatively.

"No," he said. "I killed that bull out in the thoroughfare country in Wyoming with a Winchester 45-70."

"You're a big-gun man, eh?" Mr. John said. He looked under the counter. "Have big feet, too. Do you need that big a cannon when you go out hunting kids?"

"What do you mean, kids," the down-state man said. He was one ahead.

"I mean the kid you're looking for."

"You said kids," the down-state man said.

Mr. John moved in. It was necessary. "What's Evans carry when he goes after a boy who's licked his own boy twice? You must be heavily armed, Evans. That boy could lick you, too."

"Why don't you produce him and we could try it," Evans said.

“You said kids, Mr. Jackson,” the down-state man said. “What made you say that?”

“Looking at you, you cock-sucker,” Mr. John said. “You splayfooted bastard.”

“Why don’t you come out from behind that counter if you want to talk like that?” the down-state man said.

“You’re talking to the United States Postmaster,” Mr. John said. “You’re talking without witnesses except for Turd-Face Evans. I suppose you know why they call him Turd-Face. You can figure it out. You’re a detective.”

He was happy now. He had drawn the attack and he felt now as he used to feel in the old days before he made a living from feeding and bedding resorters who rocked in rustic chairs on the front porch of his hotel while they looked out over the lake.

“Listen, Splayfoot, I remember you very well now. Don’t you remember me, Splayzey?”

The down-state man looked at him. But he did not remember him.

“I remember you in Cheyenne the day Tom Horn was hanged,” Mr. John told him. “You were one of the ones that framed him with promises from the association. Do you remember now? Who owned the saloon in Medicine Bow when you worked for the people that gave it to Tom? Is that why you ended up doing what you’re doing? Haven’t you got any memory?”

“When did you come back here?”

“Two years after they dropped Tom.”

“I’ll be goddamned.”

“Do you remember when I gave you that bull tusk when we were packing out from Greybull?”

“Sure. Listen, Jim, I got to get this kid.”

“My name’s John,” Mr. John said. “John Packard. Come on in back and have a drink. You want to get to know this other character. His name is Crut-Face Evans. We used to call him Turd-Face. I just changed it now out of kindness.”

“Mr. John,” said Mr. Evans. “Why don’t you be friendly and cooperative.”

“I just changed your name, didn’t I?” said Mr. John. “What kind of cooperation do you boys want?”

In the back of the store Mr. John took a bottle off a low shelf in the corner and handed it to the down-state man.

“Drink up, Splayzey,” he said. “You look like you need it.”

They each took a drink and then Mr. John asked, “What are you after this kid for?”

“Violation of the game laws,” the down-state man said.

“What particular violation?”

“He killed a buck deer the twelfth of last month.”

“Two men with guns out after a boy because he killed a deer the twelfth of last month,” Mr. John said.

“There’ve been other violations.”

“But this is the one you’ve got proof of.”

“That’s about it.”

“What were the other violations?”

“Plenty.”

“But you haven’t got proof.”

“I didn’t say that,” Evans said. “But we’ve got proof on this.”

“And the date was the twelfth?”

“That’s right,” said Evans.

“Why don’t you ask some questions instead of answering them?” the down-state man said to his partner. Mr. John laughed. “Let him alone, Splayzey,” he said. “I like to see that great brain work.”

“How well do you know the boy?” the down-state man asked.

“Pretty well.”

“Ever do any business with him?”

“He buys a little stuff here once in a while. Pays cash.”

“Do you have any idea where he’d head for?”

“He’s got folks in Oklahoma.”

“When did you see him last?” Evans asked.

“Come on, Evans,” the down-state man said. “You’re wasting our time. Thanks for the drink, Jim.”

“John,” Mr. John said. “What’s your name, Splayzey?”

“Porter. Henry J. Porter.”

“Splayzey, you’re not going to do any shooting at that boy.”

“I’m going to bring him in.”

“You always were a murderous bastard.”

“Come on, Evans,” the down-state man said. “We’re wasting time in here.”

“You remember what I said about the shooting,” Mr. John said very quietly.

“I heard you,” the down-state man said.

The two men went out through the store and unhitched their light wagon and drove off. Mr. John watched them go up the road. Evans was driving and the down-state man was talking to him.

“Henry J. Porter,” Mr. John thought. “The only name I can remember for him is Splayzey. He had such big feet he had to have made-to-order boots. Splayfoot they called him. Then Splayzey. It was his tracks by the spring where that Nester’s boy was shot that they hung Tom for. Splayzey. Splayzey what? Maybe I never did know. Splayfoot Splayzey. Splayfoot Porter? No, it wasn’t Porter.”

“I’m sorry about those baskets, Mrs. Tabeshaw,” he said. “It’s too late in the season now and they don’t carry over. But if you’d be patient with them down at the hotel you’d get rid of them.”

“You buy them, sell at the hotel,” Mrs. Tabeshaw suggested.

“No. They’d buy them better from you,” Mr. John told her. “You’re a fine looking woman.”

“Long time ago,” Mrs. Tabeshaw said.

“Suzy, I’d like to see you,” Mr. John said.

In the back of the store he said, “Tell me about it.”

“I told you already. They came for Nickie and they waited for him to come home. His youngest sister let him know they were waiting for him. When they were sleeping drunk Nickie got his stuff and pulled out. He’s got grub for two weeks easy and he’s got his rifle and young Littless went with him.”

“Why did she go?”

“I don’t know, Mr. John. I guess she wanted to look after him and keep him from doing anything bad. You know him.”

“You live up by Evans’s. How much do you think he knows about the country Nick uses?”

“All he can. But I don’t know how much.”

“Where do you think they went?”

“I wouldn’t know, Mr. John. Nickie knows a lot of country.”

“That man with Evans is no good. He’s really bad.”

“He isn’t very smart.”

“He’s smarter than he acts. The booze has him down. But he’s smart and he’s bad, I used to know him.”

“What do you want me to do.”

“Nothing, Suzy. Let me know about anything.”

“I’ll add up my stuff, Mr. John, and you can check it.”

“How are you going home?”

“I can get the boat up to Henry’s Dock and then get a rowboat from the cottage and row down and get the stuff. Mr. John, what will they do with Nickie?”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“They were talking about getting him put in the reform school.”

“I wish he hadn’t killed that buck.”

“So does he. He told me he was reading in a book about how you could crease something with a bullet and it wouldn’t do any harm. It would just stun it and Nickie wanted to try it. He said it was a damn fool thing to do. But he wanted to try it. Then he hit the buck and broke its neck. He felt awful about it. He felt awful about trying to crease it in the first place.”

“I know.”

“Then it must have been Evans found the meat where he had it hung up in the old springhouse. Anyway somebody took it.”

“Who could have told Evans?”

“I think it was just that boy of his found it. He trails around after Nick all the time. You never see him. He could have seen Nickie kill the buck.

That boy's no good, Mr. John. But he sure can trail around after anybody. He's liable to be in this room right now."

"No," said Mr. John. "But he could be listening outside."

"I think he's after Nick by now," the girl said.

"Did you hear them say anything about him at the house?"

"They never mentioned him," Suzy said.

"Evans must have left him home to do the chores. I don't think we have to worry about him till they get home to Evans's."

"I can row up the lake to home this afternoon and get one of our kids to let me know if Evans hires anyone to do the chores. That will mean he's turned that boy loose."

"Both the men are too old to trail anybody."

"But that boy's terrible, Mr. John, and he knows too much about Nickie and where he would go. He'd find them and then bring the men up to them."

"Come in back of the post office," Mr. John said.

Back of the filing slits and the lockboxes and the registry book and the flat stamp books in place along with the cancellation stamps and their pads, with the General Delivery window down, so that Suzy felt again the glory of office that had been hers when she had helped out in the store, Mr. John said, "Where do you think they went, Suzy?"

"I wouldn't know, true. Somewhere not too far or he wouldn't take Littless. Somewhere that's really good or he wouldn't take her. They know about the trout for trout dinners, too, Mr. John."

“That boy?”

“Sure.”

“Maybe we better do something about the Evans boy.”

“I’d kill him. I’m pretty sure that’s why Littless went along. So Nickie wouldn’t kill him.”

“You fix it up so we keep track of them.”

“I will. But you have to think out something, Mr. John. Mrs. Adams, she’s just broke down. She just gets a sick headache like always. Here. You better take this letter.”

“You drop it in the box,” Mr. John said. “That’s United States mail.” “I wanted to kill them both last night when they were asleep.”

“No,” Mr. John told her. “Don’t talk that way and don’t think that way.”

“Didn’t you ever want to kill anybody, Mr. John?”

“Yes. But it’s wrong and it doesn’t work out.”

“My father killed a man.”

“It didn’t do him any good.” “He couldn’t help it.”

“You have to learn to help it,” Mr. John said. “You get along now, Suzy.”

“I’ll see you tonight or in the morning,” Suzy said. “I wish I still worked here, Mr. John.”

“So do I, Suzy. But Mrs. Packard doesn’t see it that way.”

“I know,” said Suzy. “That’s the way everything is.”

Nick and his sister were lying on a browse bed under a lean-to that they had built together on the edge of the hemlock forest looking out over the slope of the hill to the cedar swamp and the blue hills beyond.

“If it isn’t comfortable, Littless, we can feather in some more balsam on that hemlock. We’ll be tired tonight and this will do. But we can fix it up really good tomorrow.”

“It feels lovely,” his sister said. “Lie loose and really feel it, Nickie.”

“It’s a pretty good camp,” Nick said. “And it doesn’t show. We’ll only use little fires.”

“Would a fire show across to the hills?”

“It might,” Nick said. “A fire shows a long way at night. But I’ll stake out a blanket behind it. That way it won’t show.”

“Nickie, wouldn’t it be nice if there wasn’t anyone after us and we were just here for fun?”

“Don’t start thinking that way so soon,” Nick said. “We just started. Anyway if we were just here for fun we wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m sorry, Nickie.”

“You don’t need to be,” Nick told her. “Look, Littless, I’m going down to get a few trout for supper.”

“Can I come?”

“No. You stay here and rest. You had a tough day. You read a while or just be quiet.”

“It was tough in the slashings, wasn’t it? I thought it was really hard. Did I do all right?”

“You did wonderfully and you were wonderful making camp. But you take it easy now.”

“Have we got a name for this camp?”

“Let’s call it Camp Number One,” Nick said.

He went down the hill toward the creek and when he had come almost to the bank he stopped and cut himself a willow stick about four feet long and trimmed it, leaving the bark on. He could see the clear fast water of the stream. It was narrow and deep and the banks were mossy here before the stream entered the swamp. The dark clear water flowed fast and its rushing made bulges on the surface. Nick did not go close to it as he knew it flowed under the banks and he did not want to frighten a fish by walking on the bank.

There must be quite a few up here in the open now, he thought. It’s pretty late in the summer.

He took a coil of silk line out of a tobacco pouch he carried in the left breast pocket of his shirt and cut a length that was not quite as long as the willow stick and fastened it to the tip where he had notched it lightly.

Then he fastened on a hook that he took from the pouch; then holding the shank of the hook he tested the pull of the line and the bend of the willow. He laid his rod down now and went back to where the trunk of a small birch tree, dead for several years, lay on its side in the grove of birches that bordered the cedars by the stream. He rolled the log over and found several earthworms under it.

They were not big. But they were red and lively and he put them in a flat round tin with holes punched in the top that had once held

Copenhagen snuff. He put some dirt over them and rolled the log back. This was the third year he had found bait at this same place and he had always replaced the log so that it was as he had found it.

Nobody knows how big this creek is, he thought. It picks up an awful volume of water in that bad swamp up above. Now he looked up the creek and down it and up the hill to the hemlock forest where the camp was. Then he walked to where he had left the pole with the line and the hook and baited the hook carefully and spat on it for good luck. Holding the pole and the line with the baited hook in his right hand he walked very carefully and gently toward the bank of the narrow, heavy-flowing stream.

It was so narrow here that his willow pole would have spanned it and as he came close to the bank he heard the turbulent rush of the water. He stopped by the bank, out of sight of anything in the stream, and took two lead shot, split down one side, out of the tobacco pouch and bent them on the line about a foot above the hook, clinching them with his teeth.

He swung the hook on which the two worms curled out over the water and dropped it gently in so that it sank, swirling in the fast water, and he lowered the tip of the willow pole to let the current take the line and the baited hook under the bank. He felt the line straighten and a sudden heavy firmness. He swung up on the pole and it bent almost double in his hand. He felt the throbbing, jerking pull that did not yield as he pulled.

Then it yielded, rising in the water with the line. There was a heavy wildness of movement in the narrow, deep current, and the trout was torn out of the water and, flopping in the air, sailed over Nick's

shoulder and onto the bank behind him. Nick saw him shine in the sun and then he found him where he was tumbling in the ferns.

He was strong and heavy in Nick's hands and he had a pleasant smell and Nick saw how dark his back was and how brilliant his spots were colored and how bright the edges of his fins were. They were white on the edge with a black line behind and then there was the lovely golden sunset color of his belly. Nick held him in his right hand and he could just reach around him.

He's pretty big for the skillet, he thought. But I've hurt him and I have to kill him.

He knocked the trout's head sharply against the handle of his hunting knife and laid him against the trunk of a birch tree.

"Damn," he said. "He's a perfect size for Mrs. Packard and her trout dinners. But he's pretty big for Littless and me."

I better go upstream and find a shallow and try to get a couple of small ones, he thought. Damn, didn't he feel like something when I horsed him out though? They can talk all they want about playing them but people that have never horsed them out don't know what they can make you feel. What if it only lasts that long? It's the time when there's no give at all and then they start to come and what they do to you on the way up and into the air.

This is a strange creek, he thought. It's funny when you have to hunt for small ones.

He found his pole where he had thrown it. The hook was bent and he straightened it. Then he picked up the heavy fish and started up the stream.

There's one shallow, pebbly part just after she comes out of the upper swamp, he thought. I can get a couple of small ones there. Littleless might not like this big one. If she gets homesick I'll have to take her back. I wonder what those old boys are doing now? I don't think that goddam Evans kid knows about this place. That son of a bitch. I don't think anybody fished in here but Indians. You should have been an Indian, he thought. It would have saved you a lot of trouble.

He made his way up the creek, keeping back from the stream but once stepping onto a piece of bank where the stream flowed underground. A big trout broke out in a violence that made a slashing wake in the water. He was a trout so big that it hardly seemed he could turn in the stream.

"When did you come up?" Nick said when the fish had gone under the bank again further upstream. "Boy, what a trout."

At the pebbly shallow stretch he caught two small trout. They were beautiful fish, too, firm and hard and he gutted the three fish and tossed the guts into the stream, then washed the trout carefully in the cold water and then wrapped them in a small faded sugar sack from his pocket.

It's a good thing that girl likes fish, he thought. I wish we could have picked some berries. I know where I can always get some, though. He started back up the hill slope toward their camp. The sun was down behind the hill and the weather was good. He looked out across the swamp and up in the sky, above where the arm of the lake would be, he saw a fish hawk flying.

He came up to the lean-to very quietly and his sister did not hear him. She was lying on her side, reading. Seeing her, he spoke softly not to startle her. "What did you do, you monkey?"

She turned and looked at him and smiled and shook her head.

"I cut it off," she said.

"How?"

"With a scissors. How did you think?"

"How did you see to do it?"

"I just held it out and cut it. It's easy. Do I look like a boy?"

"Like a wild boy of Borneo."

"I couldn't cut it like a Sunday-school boy. Does it look too wild?"

"No."

"It's very exciting," she said. "Now I'm your sister but I'm a boy, too. Do you think it will change me into a boy?"

"No."

"I wish it would."

"You're crazy, Littless."

"Maybe I am. Do I look like an idiot boy?"

"A little."

"You can make it neater. You can see to cut it with a comb."

"I'll have to make it a little better but not much. Are you hungry, idiot brother?"

"Can't I just be an un-idiot brother?"

"I don't want to trade you for a brother."

“You have to now, Nickie, don’t you see? It was something we had to do. I should have asked you but I knew it was something we had to do so I did it for a surprise.”

“I like it,” Nick said. “The hell with everything. I like it very much.”

“Thank you, Nickie, so much. I was laying trying to rest like you said. But all I could do was imagine things to do for you. I was going to get you a chewing tobacco can full of knockout drops from some big saloon in some place like Sheboygan.”

“Who did you get them from?”

Nick was sitting down now and his sister sat on his lap and held her arms around his neck and rubbed her cropped head against his cheek.

“I got them from the Queen of the Whores,” she said. “And you know the name of the saloon?”

“No.”

“The Royal Ten Dollar Gold Piece Inn and Emporium.”

“What did you do there?”

“I was a whore’s assistant.”

“What’s a whore’s assistant do?”

“Oh, she carries the whore’s train when she walks and opens her carriage door and shows her to the right room. It’s like a lady in waiting I guess.”

“What’s she say to the whore?”

“She’ll say anything that comes into her mind as long as it’s polite.”

“Like what, brother?”

“Like, ‘Well ma’am, it must be pretty tiring on a hot day like today to be just a bird in a gilded cage.’ Things like that.”

“What’s the whore say?”

“She says, ‘Yes, indeedy. It sure is sweetness.’ Because this whore I was whore’s assistant to is of humble origin.”

“What kind of origin are you?”

“I’m the sister or the brother of a morbid writer and I’m delicately brought up. This makes me intensely desirable to the main whore and to all of her circle.”

“Did you get the knockout drops?”

“Of course. She said, ‘Hon, take these little old drops.’ ‘Thank you,’ I said! ‘Give my regards to your morbid brother and ask him to stop by the Emporium anytime he is at Sheboygan.’”

“Get off my lap,” Nick said.

“That’s just the way they talk in the Emporium,” Little said.

“I have to get supper. Aren’t you hungry?”

“I’ll get supper.”

“No,” Nick said. “You keep on talking.”

“Don’t you think we’re going to have fun, Nickie?”

“We’re having fun now.”

“Do you want me to tell you about the other thing I did for you?”

“You mean before you decided to do something practical and cut off your hair?”

“This was practical enough. Wait till you hear it. Can I kiss you while you’re making supper?”

“Wait a while and I’ll tell you. What was it you were going to do?”

“Well, I guess I was ruined morally last night when I stole the whiskey. Do you think you can be ruined morally by just one thing like that?”

“No. Anyway the bottle was open.”

“Yes. But I took the empty pint bottle and the quart bottle with the whiskey in it out to the kitchen and I poured the pint bottle full and some spilled on my hand and I licked it off and I thought that probably ruined me morally.”

“How’d it taste?”

“Awfully strong and funny and a little sick-making.”

“That wouldn’t ruin you morally.”

“Well, I’m glad because if I was ruined morally how could I exercise a good influence on you?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. “What was it you were going to do?”

He had his fire made and the skillet resting on it and he was laying strips of bacon in the skillet. His sister was watching and she had her hands folded across her knees and he watched her unclasp her hands

and put one arm down and lean on it and put her legs out straight. She was practicing being a boy.

“I’ve got to learn to put my hands right.”

“Keep them away from your head.” “I know. It would be easy if there was some boy my own age to copy.”

“Copy me.”

“That would be natural, wouldn’t it? You won’t laugh, though?”

“Maybe.”

“Gee, I hope I won’t start to be a girl while we’re on the trip.”

“Don’t worry.”

“We have the same shoulders and the same kind of legs.”

“What was the other thing you were going to do?”

Nick was cooking the trout now. The bacon was curled brown on a fresh-cut chip of wood from the piece of fallen timber they were using for the fire and they both smelled the trout cooking in the bacon fat. Nick basted them and then turned them and basted them again. It was getting dark and he had rigged a piece of canvas behind the little fire so that it would not be seen.

“What were you going to do?” he asked again. Littless leaned forward and spat toward the fire.

“How was that?”

“You missed the skillet anyway.”

“Oh, it’s pretty bad. I got it out of the Bible. I was going to take three spikes, one for each of them, and drive them into the temples of those two and that boy while they slept.”

“What were you going to drive them in with?”

“A muffled hammer.”

“How do you muffle a hammer?”

“I’d muffle it all right.”

“That nail thing’s pretty rough to try.”

“Well, that girl did it in the Bible and since I’ve seen armed men drunk and asleep and circulated among them at night and stolen their whiskey why shouldn’t I go the whole way, especially if I learned it in the Bible?”

“They didn’t have a muffled hammer in the Bible.”

“I guess I mixed it up with muffled oars.”

“Maybe. And we don’t want to kill anybody. That’s why you came along.”

“I know. But crime comes easy for you and me, Nickie. We’re different from the others. Then I thought if I was ruined morally I might as well be useful.”

“You’re crazy, Littless,” he said. “Listen, does tea keep you awake?”

“I don’t know. I never had it at night. Only peppermint tea.”

“I’ll make it very weak and put canned cream in it.”

“I don’t need it, Nickie, if we’re short.”

“It will just give the milk a little taste.”

They were eating now. Nick had cut them each two slices of rye bread and he soaked one slice for each in the bacon fat in the skillet. They ate that and the trout that were crisp outside and cooked well and very tender inside. Then they put the trout skeletons in the fire and ate the bacon made in a sandwich with the other piece of bread, and then Littless drank the weak tea with the condensed milk in it and Nick tapped two slivers of wood into the holes he had punched in the can.

“Did you have enough?”

“Plenty. The trout was wonderful and the bacon, too. Weren’t we lucky they had rye bread?”

“Eat an apple,” he said. “Maybe we’ll have something good tomorrow. Maybe I should have made a bigger supper, Littless.”

“No. I had plenty.”

“You’re sure you’re not hungry?”

“No. I’m full. I’ve got some chocolate if you’d like some.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“From my savior.”

“Where?”

“My savior. Where I save everything.”

“Oh.”

“This is fresh. Some is the hard kind from the kitchen. We can start on that and save the other for sometime special. Look, my savior’s got a

drawstring like a tobacco pouch. We can use it for nuggets and things like that. Do you think we'll get out west, Nickie, on this trip?"

"I haven't got it figured yet."

"I'd like to get my savior packed full of nuggets worth sixteen dollars an ounce."

Nick cleaned up the skillet and put the pack in at the head of the leanto. One blanket was spread over the browse bed and he put the other one on it and tucked it under on Littless's side. He cleaned out the two-quart tin pail he'd made tea in and filled it with cold water from the spring. When he came back from the spring his sister was in the bed asleep, her head on the pillow she had made by rolling her blue jeans around her moccasins. He kissed her but she did not wake and he put on his old Mackinaw coat and felt in the packsack until he found the pint bottle of whiskey.

He opened it and smelled it and it smelled very good. He dipped a half a cup of water out of the small pail he had brought from the spring and poured a little of the whiskey in it. Then he sat and sipped this very slowly, letting it stay under his tongue before he brought it slowly back over his tongue and swallowed it.

He watched the small coals of the fire brighten with the light evening breeze and he tasted the whiskey and cold water and looked at the coals and thought. Then he finished the cup, dipped up some cold water and drank it and went to bed. The rifle was under his left leg and his head was on the good hard pillow his moccasins and the rolled trousers made and he pulled his side of the blanket tight around him and said his prayers and went to sleep.

In the night he was cold and he spread his Mackinaw coat over his sister and rolled his back over closer to her so that there was more of his side of the blanket under him. He felt for the gun and tucked it under his leg again.

The air was cold and sharp to breathe and he smelled the cut hemlock and balsam boughs. He had not realized how tired he was until the cold had waked him. Now he lay comfortable again feeling the warmth of his sister's body against his back and he thought, I must take good care of her and keep her happy and get her back safely. He listened to her breathing and to the quiet of the night and then he was asleep again.

It was just light enough to see the far hills beyond the swamp when he woke. He lay quietly and stretched the stiffness from his body. Then he sat up and pulled on his khaki trousers and put on his moccasins. He watched his sister sleeping with the collar of the warm Mackinaw coat under her chin and her high cheekbones and brown freckled skin light rose under the brown, her chopped-off hair showing the beautiful line of her head and emphasizing her straight nose and her close-set ears. He wished he could draw her face and he watched the way her long lashes lay on her cheeks.

She looks like a small wild animal, he thought, and she sleeps like one. How would you say her head looks, he thought. I guess the nearest is that it looks as though someone had cut her hair off on a wooden block with an ax. It has a sort of a carved look. He loved his sister very much and she loved him too much. But, he thought, I guess those things straighten out. At least I hope so.

There's no sense waking anyone up, he thought. She must have been really tired if I'm as tired as I am. If we are all right here we are doing

just what we should do: staying out of sight until things quiet down and that down-state man pulls out. I've got to feed her better, though. It's a shame I couldn't have outfitted really good.

We've got a lot of things, though. The pack was heavy enough. But what we want to get today is berries. I better get a partridge or a couple if I can. We can get good mushrooms, too. We'll have to be careful about the bacon but we won't need it with the shortening. Maybe I fed her too light last night. She's used to lots of milk, too, and sweet things.

Don't worry about it. We'll feed good. It's a good thing she likes trout. They were really good. Don't worry about her. She'll eat wonderfully. But, Nick, boy, you certainly didn't feed her too much yesterday. Better to let her sleep than to wake her up now. There's plenty for you to do.

He started to get some things out of the pack very carefully and his sister smiled in her sleep. The brown skin came taut over her cheekbones when she smiled and the undercolor showed. She did not wake and he started to prepare to make breakfast and get the fire ready. There was plenty of wood cut and he built a very small fire and made tea while he waited to start breakfast. He drank his tea straight and ate three dried apricots and he tried to read in Lorna Doone. But he had read it and it did not have magic any more and he knew it was a loss on this trip.

Late in the afternoon, when they had made camp, he had put some prunes in a tin pail to soak and he put them on the fire now to stew. In the pack he found the prepared buckwheat flour and he put it out with an enameled saucepan and a tin cup to mix the flour with water to make a batter.

He had the tin of vegetable shortening and he cut a piece off the top of an empty flour sack and wrapped it around a cut stick and tied it tight with a piece of fish line. Littless had brought four old flour sacks and he was proud of her.

He mixed the batter and put the skillet on the fire, greasing it with the shortening which he spread with the cloth on the stick. First it made the skillet shine darkly, then it sizzled and spat and he greased again and poured the batter smoothly and watched it bubble and then start to firm around the edges.

He watched the rising and the forming of the texture and the gray color of the cake. He loosened it from the pan with a fresh clean chip and flipped it and caught it, the beautiful browned side up, the other sizzling. He could feel its weight but see it growing in buoyancy in the skillet.

“Good morning,” his sister said. “Did I sleep awfully late?”

“No, devil.”

She stood up with her shirt hanging down over her brown legs.

“You’ve done everything.”

“No. I just started the cakes.”

“Doesn’t that one smell wonderful? I’ll go to the spring and wash and come and help.”

“Don’t wash in the spring.”

"I'm not white man," she said. She was gone behind the lean-to.

"Where did you leave the soap?" she asked.

"It's by the spring. There's an empty lard bucket. Bring the butter, will you. It's in the spring."

"I'll be right back."

There was a half a pound of butter and she brought it wrapped in the oiled paper in the empty lard bucket.

They ate the buckwheat cakes with butter and Log Cabin syrup out of a tin Log Cabin can. The top of the chimney unscrewed and the syrup poured from the chimney. They were both very hungry and the cakes were delicious with the butter melting on them and running down into the cut places with the syrup. They ate the prunes out of the tin cups and drank the juice. Then they drank tea from the same cups.

"Prunes taste like a celebration," Littless said. "Think of that. How did you sleep, Nickie?"

"Good."

"Thank you for putting the Mackinaw on me. Wasn't it a lovely night, though?"

"Yes. Did you sleep all night?"

"I'm still asleep. Nickie, can we stay here always?"

"I don't think so. You'd grow up and have to get married."

"I'm going to get married to you anyway. I want to be your common-law wife. I read about it in the paper."

"That's where you read about the Unwritten Law."

“Sure. I’m going to be your common-law wife under the Unwritten Law. Can’t I, Nickie?”

“No.”

“I will. I’ll surprise you. All you have to do is live a certain time as man and wife. I’ll get them to count this time now. It’s just like homesteading.”

“I won’t let you file.”

“You can’t help yourself. That’s the Unwritten Law. I’ve thought it out lots of times. I’ll get cards printed Mrs. Nick Adams, Cross Village, Michigan—common-law wife. I’ll hand these out to a few people openly each year until the time’s up.”

“I don’t think it would work.”

“I’ve got another scheme. We’ll have a couple of children while I’m a minor. Then you have to marry me under the Unwritten Law.”

“That’s not the Unwritten Law.”

“I get mixed up on it.”

“Anyway, nobody knows yet if it works.”

“It must,” she said. “Mr. Thaw is counting on it.”

“Mr. Thaw might make a mistake.”

“Why Nickie, Mr. Thaw practically invented the Unwritten Law.”

“I thought it was his lawyer.”

“Well, Mr. Thaw put in the action anyway.”

“I don’t like Mr. Thaw,” Nick Adams said.

“That’s good. There’s things about him I don’t like either. But he certainly made the paper more interesting reading, didn’t he?”

“He gives the others something new to hate.”

“They hate Mr. Stanford White, too.”

“I think they’re jealous of both of them.”

“I believe that’s true, Nickie. Just like they’re jealous of us.”

“Think anybody is jealous of us now?”

“Not right now maybe. Our mother will think we’re fugitives from justice steeped in sin and iniquity. It’s a good thing she doesn’t know I got you that whiskey.”

“I tried it last night. It’s very good.”

“Oh, I’m glad. That’s the first whiskey I ever stole anywhere. Isn’t it wonderful that it’s good? I didn’t think anything about those people could be good.”

“I’ve got to think about them too much. Let’s not talk about them,” Nick said.

“All right. What are we going to do today?”

“What would you like to do?”

“I’d like to go to Mr. John’s store and get everything we need.”

“We can’t do that.”

“I know it. What do you plan to really do?”

“We ought to get some berries and I ought to get a partridge or some partridges. We’ve always got trout. But I don’t want you to get tired of trout.”

“Were you ever tired of trout?”

“No. But they say people get tired of them.”

“I wouldn’t get tired of them,” Littless said. “You get tired of pike right away. But you never get tired of trout nor of perch. I know, Nickie. True.”

“You don’t get tired of walleyed pike either,” Nick said. “Only of shovelnose. Boy, you sure get tired of them.”

“I don’t like the pitchfork bones,” his sister said. “It’s a fish that surfeits you.”

“We’ll clean up here and I’ll find a place to cache the shells and we’ll make a trip for berries and try to get some birds.”

“I’ll bring two lard pails and a couple of the sacks,” his sister said.

“Littless,” Nick said. “You remember about going to the bathroom, will you please?”

“Of course.”

“That’s important.”

“I know it. You remember, too.”

“I will.”

Nick went back into the timber and buried the carton of .22 long-rifles and the loose boxes of .22 shorts under the brown-needled floor at the base of a big hemlock. He put back the packed needles he had cut with

his knife and made a small cut as far up as he could reach on the heavy bark of the tree. He took a bearing on the tree and then came out onto the hillside and walked down to the lean-to.

It was a lovely morning now. The sky was high and clear blue and no clouds had come yet. Nick was happy with his sister and he thought, no matter how this thing comes out we might as well have a good happy time. He had already learned there was only one day at a time and that it was always the day you were in. It would be today until it was tonight and tomorrow would be today again. This was the main thing he had learned so far.

Today was a good day and coming down to the camp with his rifle he was happy although their trouble was like a fishhook caught in his pocket that pricked him occasionally as he walked. They left the pack inside the lean-to. There were great odds against a bear bothering it in the daytime because any bear would be down below feeding on berries around the swamp. But Nick buried the bottle of whiskey up behind the spring. Littleless was not back yet and Nick sat down on the log of the fallen tree they were using for firewood and checked his rifle.

They were going after partridges so he pulled out the tube of the magazine and poured the long-rifle cartridges into his hand and then put them into a chamois pouch and filled the magazine with .22 shorts. They made less noise and would not tear the meat up if he could not get head shots.

He was all ready now and wanted to start. Where's that girl anyway, he thought. Then he thought, don't get excited. You told her to take her time. Don't get nervous. But he was nervous and it made him angry at himself.

“Here I am,” his sister said. “I’m sorry that I took so long. I went too far away, I guess.”

“You’re fine,” Nick said. “Let’s go. You have the pails?”

“Uh huh, and covers, too.”

They started down across the hill to the creek. Nick looked carefully up the stream and along the hillside. His sister watched him. She had the pails in one of the sacks and carried it slung over her shoulder by the other sack.

“Aren’t you taking a pole, Nickie?” she asked him.

“No. I’ll cut one if we fish.”

He moved ahead of his sister, holding the rifle in one hand, keeping a little way away from the stream. He was hunting now.

“It’s a strange creek,” his sister said.

“It’s the biggest small stream I’ve ever known,” Nick told her.

“It’s deep and scary for a little stream.”

“It keeps having new springs,” Nick said. “And it digs under the bank and it digs down. It’s awful cold water, Littless. Feel it.”

“Gee,” she said. It was numbing cold.

“The sun warms it a little,” Nick said. “But not much. We’ll hunt along easy. There’s a berry patch down below.”

They went along down the creek. Nick was studying the banks. He had seen a mink’s track and shown it to his sister and they had seen tiny rubycrowned kinglets that were hunting insects and let the boy and girl come close as they moved sharply and delicately in the cedars. They had seen cedar waxwings so calm and gentle and distinguished moving

in their lovely elegance with the magic wax touches on their wing coverts and their tails, and Littless had said, "They're the most beautiful, Nickie. There couldn't be more simply beautiful birds."

"They're built like your face," he said.

"No, Nickie. Don't make fun. Cedar waxwings make me so proud and happy that I cry."

"When they wheel and light and then move so proud and friendly and gently," Nick said.

They had gone on and suddenly Nick had raised the rifle and shot before his sister could see what he was looking at. Then she heard the sound of a big bird tossing and beating its wings on the ground. She saw Nick pumping the gun and shoot twice more and each time she heard another pounding of wings in the willow brush.

Then there was the whirring noise of wings as large brown birds burst out of the willows and one bird flew only a little way and lit in the willows and with its crested head on one side looked down, bending the collar of feathers on his neck where the other birds were still thumping. The bird looking down from the red willow brush was beautiful, plump, heavy and looked so stupid with his head turned down and as Nick raised his rifle slowly, his sister whispered, "No, Nickie. Please no. We've got plenty."

"All right," Nick said. "You want to take him?"

"No, Nickie. No."

Nick went forward into the willows and picked up the three grouse and batted their heads against the butt of the rifle stock and laid them out

on the moss. His sister felt them, warm and full-breasted and beautifully feathered.

“Wait till we eat them,” Nick said. He was very happy.

“I’m sorry for them now,” his sister said. “They were enjoying the morning just like we were.”

She looked up at the grouse still in the tree.

“It does look a little silly still staring down,” she said.

“This time of year the Indians call them fool hens. After they’ve been hunted they get smart. They’re not the real fool hens. Those never get smart. They’re willow grouse. These are ruffed grouse.”

“I hope we’ll get smart,” his sister said. “Tell him to go away, Nickie.”

“You tell him.”

“Go away, partridge.”

The grouse did not move.

Nick raised the rifle and the grouse looked at him. Nick knew he could not shoot the bird without making his sister sad and he made a noise blowing out so his tongue rattled and lips shook like a grouse bursting from cover and the bird looked at him fascinated.

“We better not annoy him,” Nick said.

“I’m sorry, Nickie,” his sister said. “He is stupid.”

“Wait till we eat them,” Nick told her. “You’ll see why we hunt them.”

“Are they out of season, too?”

“Sure. But they are full grown and nobody but us would ever hunt them. I kill plenty of great horned owls and a great homed owl will kill a partridge every day if he can. They hunt all the time and they kill all the good birds.”

“He certainly could kill that one easy,” his sister said. “I don’t feel bad any more. Do you want a bag to carry them in?”

“I’ll draw them and then pack them in the bag with some ferns. It isn’t so far to the berries now.”

They sat against one of the cedars and Nick opened the birds and took out their warm entrails and feeling the inside of the birds hot on his right hand he found the edible parts of the giblets and cleaned them and then washed them in the stream. When the birds were cleaned he smoothed their feathers and wrapped them in ferns and put them in the flour sack.

He tied the mouth of the flour sack and two corners with a piece of fish line and slung it over his shoulder and then went back to the stream and dropped the entrails in and tossed some bright pieces of lung in to see the trout rise in the rapid heavy flow of the water.

“They’d make good bait but we don’t need bait now,” he said. “Our trout are all in the stream and we’ll take them when we need them.”

“This stream would make us rich if it was near home,” his sister said.

“It would be fished out then. This is the last really wild stream there is except in another awful country to get to beyond the foot of the lake. I never brought anybody here to fish.”

“Who ever fishes it?”

“Nobody I know.”

“Is it a virgin stream?”

“No. Indians fish it. But they’re gone now since they quit cutting hemlock bark and the camps closed down.”

“Does the Evans boy know?”

“Not him,” Nick said. But then he thought about it and it made him feel sick. He could see the Evans boy.

“What’re you thinking, Nickie?”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“You were thinking. You tell me. We’re partners.”

“He might know,” Nick said. “Goddam it. He might know.”

“But you don’t know that he knows?”

“No. That’s the trouble. If I did I’d get out.”

“Maybe he’s back at camp now,” his sister said.

“Don’t talk that way. Do you want to bring him?”

“No,” she said. “Please, Nickie, I’m sorry I brought it up.”

“I’m not,” Nick said. “I’m grateful. I knew it anyway. Only I’d stopped thinking about it. I have to think about things now the rest of my life.”

“You always thought about things.”

“Not like this.”

“Let’s go down and get the berries anyway,” Littless said. “There isn’t anything we can do now to help, is there?”

“No,” Nick said. “We’ll pick the berries and get back to camp.”

But Nick was trying to accept it now and think his way all the way through it. He must not get in a panic about it. Nothing had changed. Things were just as they were when he had decided to come here and let things blow over. The Evans boy could have followed him here before. But it was very unlikely. He could have followed him one time when he had gone in from the road through the Hodges’ place, but it was doubtful. Nobody had been fishing the stream. He could be sure of that. But the Evans boy did not care about fishing.

“All that bastard cares about is trailing me,” he said.

“I know it, Nickie.”

“This is three times he’s made trouble.”

“I know it, Nickie. But don’t you kill him.”

That’s why she came along, Nick thought. That’s why she’s here. I can’t do it while she’s along.

“I know I mustn’t kill him,” he said. “There’s nothing we can do now. Let’s not talk about it.”

“As long as you don’t kill him,” his sister said. “There’s nothing we can’t get out of and nothing that won’t blow over.”

“Let’s get back to camp,” Nick said. “Without the berries?”

“We’ll get the berries another day.”

“Are you nervous, Nickie?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

“But what good will we be back at camp?” “We’ll know quicker.”

“Can’t we just go along the way we were going?”

“Not now. I’m not scared, Littless. And don’t you be scared. But something’s made me nervous.”

Nick had cut up away from the stream into the edge of the timber and they were walking in the shade of the trees. They would come onto the camp now from above.

From the timber they approached the camp carefully. Nick went ahead with the rifle. The camp had not been visited.

“You stay here,” Nick told his sister. “I’m going to have a look beyond.” He left the sack with the birds and the berry pails with Littless and went well upstream. As soon as he was out of sight of his sister he changed the .22 shorts in the rifle for the long-rifles. I won’t kill him, he thought, but anyway it’s the right thing to do. He made a careful search of the country. He saw no sign of anyone and he went down to the stream and then downstream and back up to the camp.

“I’m sorry I was nervous, Littless,” he said. “We might as well have a good lunch and then we won’t have to worry about a fire showing at night.”

“I’m worried now, too,” she said.

“Don’t you be worried. It’s just like it was before.”

“But he drove us back from getting the berries without him even being here.”

“I know. But he’s not been here. Maybe he’s never even been to this creek ever. Maybe we’ll never see him again.”

“He makes me scared, Nickie, worse when he’s not here than when he’s here.”

“I know. But there isn’t any use being scared.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Well, we better wait to cook until night.”

“Why did you change?”

“He won’t be around here at night. He can’t come through the swamp in the dark. We don’t have to worry about him early in the mornings and late in the evening nor in the dark. We’ll have to be like the deer and only be out then. We’ll lay up in the daytime.”

“Maybe he’ll never come.”

“Sure. Maybe.”

“But I can stay though, can’t I?”

“I ought to get you home.”

“No. Please, Nickie. Who’s going to keep you from killing him then?”

“Listen, Littless, don’t ever talk about killing and remember I never talked about killing. There isn’t any killing nor ever going to be any.”

“True?”

“True.”

“I’m so glad.”

“Don’t even be that. Nobody ever talked about it.”

“All right. I never thought about it nor spoke about it.”

“Me either.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

“I never even thought about it.”

No, he thought. You never even thought about it. Only all day and all night. But you mustn’t think about it in front of her because she can feel it because she is your sister and you love each other.

“Are you hungry, Littless?”

“Not really.”

“Eat some of the hard chocolate and I’ll get some fresh water from the spring.”

“I don’t have to have anything.”

They looked across to where the big white clouds of the eleven o’clock breeze were coming up over the blue hills beyond the swamp. The sky was a high clear blue and the clouds came up white and detached themselves from behind the hills and moved high in the sky as the breeze freshened and the shadows of the clouds moved over the swamp and across the hillside. The wind blew in the trees now and was cool as they lay in the shade. The water from the spring was cold and fresh in the tin pail and the chocolate was not quite bitter but was hard and crunched as they chewed it.

“It’s as good as the water in the spring where we were when we first saw them,” his sister said. “It tastes even better after the chocolate.”

“We can cook if you’re hungry.”

“I’m not if you’re not.”

“I’m always hungry. I was a fool not to go on and get the berries.”

“No. You came back to find out.”

“Look, Littless. I know a good place back by the slashing we came through where we can get berries. I’ll cache everything and we can go in there through the timber all the way and pick a couple of pails full and then we’ll have them ahead for tomorrow. It isn’t a bad walk.”

“All right. But I’m fine.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“No. Not at all now after the chocolate. I’d love to just stay and read. We had a nice walk when we were hunting.”

“All right,” Nick said. “Are you tired from yesterday?”

“Maybe a little.”

“We’ll take it easy. I’ll read Wuthering Heights.”

“Is it too old to read out loud to me?”

“No.”

“Will you read it?”

“Sure.”

The End