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1

A Slight Case of Jealousy

Jeff left the thick woods and paused to look down on the house lying in the Kentucky valley below. Warm memories of days gone by flashed through his mind.

“I sure do hate to leave this and go back to the war!” he muttered. Then he shrugged his shoulders, hefted his flour sack full of slain rabbits, and made his way along the winding path, down the side of the mountain into the valley still misty in the early dawn.

The War Between the States had forced him and his family to leave Kentucky, which refused to leave the Union, and relocate in Confederate Virginia. This had been his first trip back since before the war began more than a year ago. It seemed sometimes that the fighting would go on forever. Often nightmares of Bull Run and other battles he had endured came back with sharp intensity, and Jeff would wake up in a cold sweat, thrashing around.

War hadn't seemed so terrible when, at fifteen, he had persuaded his father, now Captain Nelson Majors, to allow him to join the Confederate army as a drummer boy. Now, as he thought of how the war might last for years, he grew despondent.

His time with his friends the Carters was at an end. The bright August sunshine had brought a rich tan to his face, and he had enjoyed every day of his visit. Leah Carter and Ezra, the young, wounded

ex-prisoner, were home safe; he could assure his father that little Esther was doing well with her foster family; and his father's troops needed the supplies he had collected. He couldn't stay any longer.

As he reached the foot of the mountain and made his way across a small creek that bent like an elbow, he cast a quick glance at the water, wondering if he had time to go fishing. He brightened. I'll get Leah. We can have one more fishing trip before I have to leave.

That thought cheered him, and he lifted his head and walked quickly to the Carters' small farmhouse. Going around to the back, he dropped his sack of game on the ground and pulled out his sharp knife to begin skinning the rabbits.

"Well, looks like you got enough to feed all of us."

Jeff looked up to see Mrs. Carter emerge from the house. She was strongly built, with pretty green eyes and blonde hair that was caught at the back of her head in a neat bun. She had been a second mother to Jeff Majors, and her daughter Leah had been his best friend since both learned to walk.

"Got five rabbits," he said proudly, holding up one of them. "Fat and thumping too. Nothing like a good mess of fried rabbit and poke salad, I always say."

Mary Carter looked amused. "I hope you'll let the rest of us have a bite or two, Jeff. You brought an appetite like a panther back from the war."

He knew she was as fond of him as if he were one of her own children.

"I'll go get breakfast started. I'm fixing you one of your special treats for supper tonight—apple pie!"

Jeff's teeth flashed in a broad smile. "Apple pie! Make one just for me, will you? I haven't had good apple pie since I first left Kentucky."

Jeff turned back to the job of skinning rabbits. Leah's mother watched him for a few minutes as she cooled off from the hot kitchen.

He was tall for his age—fifteen—with the blackest hair possible, as dark as a crow's. He had large hands and feet that he still hadn't grown into, and a pair of eyes so black that one had to look close to see the pupils. He had been stringy when he left Kentucky with his family a year ago, but now had begun to fill out.

When Jeff had the rabbits skinned, he brought them to the back porch, laid them in a row on the table, and then washed his hands thoroughly in the basin. After he threw the dirty water into the flower patch below the railing, he reached for the towel hanging from a nail by the back door. He stepped inside and smiled at Sarah Carter, working with her mother at the kitchen sink.

"Well, I've done my part," he announced. "Now, Sarah, we'll see if you can cook them." A sly look came over his face, and he grinned, "Tom told me to be sure and sample your cooking. Said he wouldn't marry a woman that couldn't cook."

Sarah, at eighteen, was one of the prettiest girls in the Pineville area. She had dark brown hair and very dark blue eyes, which she focused on Jeff now. "My cooking's good enough for him. I never saw him turn anything down of mine."

Her face flushed slightly.

Jeff knew she didn't like to be teased about his older brother. They had been very much in love before the war but now were separated for who

knew how long; nothing was certain anymore. Tensions weren't helped by the fact that Tom was a sergeant in the Confederate army while Sarah's brother, Royal, was a Union soldier.

At once Jeff realized he was on dangerous ground. He said quickly, "Better get a letter written if you want me to take it to Tom. I guess I'll be leaving pretty early in the morning."

He walked into the living room where he found Mr. Carter playing with Esther, Jeff's baby sister.

Dan Carter looked up, and a grin split his craggy face. "This baby's a lot smarter than you ever were, Jeff. Why, when you were your sister's age, I don't think you had any sense at all!"

Jeff picked the child up. The baby stared at him with wide blue eyes, and he tossed her in the air, making her scream with joy. "I guess she is pretty smart, Mr. Carter," he said. "Maybe girls are just smarter than boys." He winked at Leah's father as he tossed Esther once more.

Dan Carter returned his wink and then, gathering his long, thin legs beneath him, rose slowly from the rocking chair, moving carefully as people do who have known much sickness. His once lustrous brown hair, Jeff saw, had faded to a dull, gray-streaked, muddy brown, although his light blue eyes still shone with determined pride. His mouth was firm under a scraggly mustache. He'd been wounded terribly in the Mexican War and would never regain his former strength and vitality.

"Not feeling too well today, Mr. Carter?"

"Oh, I don't complain, Jeff," he protested. "As long as a man's able to get up and walk and get some good vittles—and be with his family—he shouldn't complain."

“Guess that’s right.” Jeff carried Esther on his shoulders across the room to where an older Carter child, Morena, sat on the floor making shadow figures against the floorboards in the bright morning sunlight that streamed through the open door.

Morena’s hair was fully as blonde and her eyes were as blue as baby Esther’s. She smiled up at Jeff but didn’t move.

Jeff reached out and smoothed down her hair, saying fondly, “I’ll miss you when I go, Morena.”

It always saddened him when he looked at this child. She was as old as she would ever be, mentally. Physically, she looked like any other nine-year-old girl, but she had never learned to speak and could perform only the simplest chores, such as feeding and dressing herself. She was happy, it seemed, and for a while Jeff sat on the floor talking to her and allowing the baby to pull his hair with her chubby fingers.

“I don’t know what we would’ve done if you folks hadn’t taken Esther, Mr. Carter,” Jeff said abruptly.

“Why, it was little enough to do, Jeff.”

“Take a tiny baby—for only the Lord knows how long? And with your daughter Morena to care for already?” Jeff shook his head stubbornly. “No, sir, it was a real big thing!”

“If things had been the other way around, your family would have done the same for us,” Dan Carter insisted, sitting back down.

“No way we can ever know that.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Why, you can’t go back and do things over!”

“No, Jeff, that’s right.” Dan ran his hand over his head, thinking for a moment. “But you can know how people are. I’ve known your folks for a long

time. I'm telling you, you and your family would have done the same. Your mother—there never was a better woman!"

"I . . . I miss her every day."

"Only right you should, boy. And what would she have done if we couldn't have cared for Morena somehow?"

Jeff cocked his head to one side, then smiled. "She took in *everything*, Ma did—even sick birds and animals. Why, she took in a pesky baby fox once and nursed it back to health." He grinned at the memory. "The fool thing bit me! But she loved it."

"Yes, she was a loving woman. And what would she have done with a baby like Morena—or your Esther?"

"Loved her to death, I reckon."

"Well, there you are, Jeff." Dan smiled. "You don't have to keep on thanking us for taking care of your sister."

"It's a lot to take on, though."

"Not to Mrs. Carter, Sarah, and Leah! They dote on that little sister of yours—and so does Morena."

Jeff looked over to where Morena was looking down at the baby, cooing and stroking the fine blonde hair. He asked suddenly, "Mr. Carter, will Morena ever be any more growed up?"

"Only the good Lord knows that, Jeff."

"I wish she would get better. She's so pretty!"

Dan Carter's face showed a trace of sadness, but he said firmly, "We can't know God's ways, Jeff. But we can know that God is good and that somehow in the end Morena will be as bright and active as any other child."

"In heaven?"

“Yes, that’s right. I kind of like to think of that time, don’t you, Jeff?”

“You mean . . . heaven? When we get there?”

“Yes.” Dan smiled and added, “No wars, no droughts, no need for doctors—no politicians, either. Not like this place.”

Jeff’s face clouded as he thought through Mr. Carter’s comments. Finally he replied, “I guess I’m not a good enough Christian.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, I guess I’m not ready to go to heaven—not today, I mean.”

Mr. Carter laughed, and his eyes twinkled. “Enjoy the day, for the Lord has given it to us. ‘This is the day that the Lord hath made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.’ We can’t know when we’ll go, so we live for the Lord here until we go there.”

Jeff didn’t reply, his face darkening as thoughts of heaven led to thoughts of death—and how the war had brought death close to so many over the last year. He finally said, “Well, Ezra’s out of the war, anyway. He won’t have to fight anymore. Nobody wants a convalescing ex-prisoner of war on his front lines.”

“Yes, and I’m glad of it. I wish you were out too.”

“Me too, and Pa and Tom—and Royal, of course.”

“You know, Jeff, I think God put Ezra in that prison camp.”

“What for?” Jeff asked with surprise.

“Well, look at it,” Dan said slowly. “I can’t go off with Leah and leave this farm all the time with Mrs. Carter and Sarah and the children all alone, can I?”

“No, sir, I don’t think you can.”

“Well, it’s hard to find good help for a small farm. I tried pretty hard, and all I could come up with was hiring Ray Studdard from across the way. I couldn’t see doing anything else, as expensive as that would be. But here Ezra escapes from that Confederate prison camp, and he hides out in a farmhouse. How many farmhouses are there in that part of the country, Jeff?”

“Must be a thousand, Mr. Carter.”

“Yep, I’d say so. Ezra could have gone to any one of them. But he didn’t. He went to the *only* one where he’d have a chance to meet Leah. Now, that just *couldn’t* have been an accident!”

Jeff stared. “You think God does stuff like that? I mean . . . that He works things out for us?”

“He knows of the sparrow’s fall, Jeff, and we’re worth more than sparrows.”

Jeff shifted restlessly, then shook his head. “Too much for me to figure out,” he said finally. “Do you reckon Ezra will stay on for a long time?”

“The boy’s got no place else to go.” Mr. Carter shrugged. “Why are you asking, Jeff?”

“Oh, no reason. Just wondering.”

Jeff’s thoughts moved from Ezra—and Ezra’s budding friendship with Leah—to what a fine man Dan Carter was.

Even though he was too old for the army, and too sickly, he’d determined to do his best for the soldiers in the Union army. He’d persuaded his family that he should serve God by becoming a sutler, stocking his old wagon with supplies—including Bibles and tracts—and following the Yankee army throughout the first year of the war. He’d taken Leah with him because, even though she was just a young girl, she was strong, healthy, and smart.

Especially when he had his bad spells, she took much of the work off his shoulders.

Jeff looked about as he started to get up from the floor by Morena and Esther. "Where's Leah?"

"Oh, she's gone with Ezra. I think they went hunting birds' eggs, Jeff." He stopped abruptly, looking at Jeff's face.

The boy scooped up Esther. He swung her under his arm as he strode across the room and dumped her into Dan's arms. He muttered, "Should of known she'd rather hunt eggs than fish with me." He left the room without another word.

Almost as soon as Jeff had passed through the door, Mrs. Carter entered, her hands white with flour. Looking around, she asked with surprise, "Where's Jeff off to?"

"He just lit out after Leah and Ezra," Dan said. He gave his wife a look and shook his head. "I think he's a little bit upset."

"Upset about what?"

"Oh, I told him Ezra and Leah had gone egg hunting, and he clammed up and left with hardly a word."

She went over and looked out the window. She saw Jeff stalking off, his back straight and his steps almost military. Shaking her head, she turned back and said quietly, "Jeff hasn't taken much to Ezra. You'd think they would've become friends after Jeff helped Leah hide him the way he did."

Ezra Payne had served in the Union army and was taken captive at the Battle of Bull Run. He had escaped from prison, and Leah and Jeff helped him get away to Kentucky.

"Well, you know how strong Jeff is about Confederate rights, Mary. Might be he can't get over

Ezra being a Union soldier." Mr. Carter paused. "It's not like our Royal—or even my sutler work. Jeff's been like part of our family his whole life, but he don't have any history with Ezra."

"You're at least right on that account, Dan," she agreed. "Remember Leah told us about the set-to she and Jeff had when she first asked him to help her with Ezra."

"I don't know what's going to come of this." He shook his head. "Jeff's a good boy, but he's got hard feelings against the North."

"That's not the main cause of it, though," his wife murmured. She dusted the flour off her hands as she crossed the room, and then she lifted Esther out of Dan's lap. She pinched the baby's fat, rosy cheek, then turned to give her husband a direct look. "He's jealous of Ezra. I guess you see that, Dan. They've been awfully close, Leah and Jeff, all their lives."

"Why, they're only children!"

"I guess you don't have to be fifty years old to get possessive of somebody. Leah would be just as possessive of Jeff. I'm sorry for it, though Ezra is a fine young man. He hasn't had much of a chance in this world."

"No, he hasn't." Mr. Carter shook his head as he remembered what Ezra had told them. "Nobody should have to spend his childhood an orphan, working like a slave on some stranger's farm."

"I'm grateful we can give him some of the love he's never had." Mrs. Carter's voice came with conviction.

"But Mary, neither one of us wants Jeff hurt over Leah," he protested. "Maybe we ought not to ask Ezra to stay."

“Oh, we’ve got to! We promised. We can’t abandon him. Besides, you said yourself God brought him to give us the help we need now that Royal’s off to the war. Ezra’s such a good worker.” She put the baby down and sighed heavily. “Well, I have every confidence our prayers and Jeff’s basic good sense will make the difference. Jeff’s a good boy—he’ll just have to get over this.”

“Look! What’s this one, Leah?”

Leah Carter looked up into the thick foliage of the oak tree. She squinted at the egg Ezra was holding and said, “I can’t tell. Bring it on down.”

“Do you want all of them?”

“No, just one. Leave the rest to hatch.”

Ezra Payne came down the tree, swinging from branch to branch, using only one hand.

When he jumped to the ground, Leah laughed at him. “You’re just like a monkey, Ezra! I’ve never seen anyone who could climb a tree like you.”

Ezra smiled at the girl. He was not tall, but when he regained the weight he’d lost, he would present a formidable set of muscles to any opponent. His curly brown hair and sparkling teeth were in sharp contrast to his pale prison complexion. “Always liked to climb trees!” he said. “When I was with the army, they’d send me to the top of the tallest tree so’s I could scout out the enemy. Why, one time General McClellan himself was down at the foot with his officers.” He grinned more broadly, “There I was, telling the general of the whole Union army how it was!”

Leah laughed again as she took the egg. “That’s just another story you’re making up. Let me see that egg.” She ignored his protests of innocence, studied

the egg, and announced, "That's a catbird egg. We've got plenty of those."

"Have I got to take it back up to the nest?"

"Of course. You're not going to eat it raw!"

"I've seen the day I would, like when you found me stealing your groceries back in Virginia."

"That's different." Leah shrugged. She smiled at him suddenly, adding, "You weren't a very good burglar, Ezra. You made more noise than a wild pig."

"Didn't have much experience."

"I hope you never get any more."

Ezra climbed the tree and replaced the egg. When he was back on the ground, he affectionately slapped Leah on the shoulder and declared, "You must know every bird's egg there is, Leah."

"I ought to—been hunting them most of my life. Come on, let's go down by the river. Maybe we'll find a kingfisher nest. They're sure hard to find."

The two of them picked their way down a path overgrown with summer ferns, vines, and saplings until they came to the creek. Leah chattered happily all the time, telling Ezra about birds of all kinds. Finally she turned to him and exclaimed, "I'm so glad you've come to stay with our family, Ezra. With my brother, Royal, gone to the army, the farm's about to fall to pieces. My folks say you're an answer to prayer."

Ezra glanced at her quickly. His face grew serious. "Well, it's about the best thing that's ever happened to me, Leah. You can't know how different it is to work because you belong instead of just to get out of a beating."

He looked at the trees surrounding them and cocked his head, seeming to listen to the creek bubbling at their feet, before he said, "I've never had a

home, not a real one anyhow—just living with people, and then the army—and then prison camp.”

“My folks think a lot of you.”

“I never met anyone kinder.”

“They’re special, all right.”

“You’re sure lucky, Leah, to have good parents like them.”

Leah glanced quickly into his face and saw the honesty there. Honest pain and honest yearning. She was glad she’d helped Ezra escape from Virginia. He had been so sick that she thought he wouldn’t live. Now she said quickly, “Well, it’s good for everybody.”

Ezra fell in beside her as they walked along the creek, saying nothing for a while. Finally Ezra said, “I’m afraid Jeff doesn’t like it too much.”

Leah shot a glance at him. “He’ll be all right. Jeff just doesn’t warm up to people right away sometimes.”

“I like him fine, but he just doesn’t take to me.”

“Jeff’s too fast to make up his mind, I think. He does everything quick. He gets mad sometimes, then he’s over it in a flash and feels bad about it. Don’t worry about it, Ezra.”

They followed the creek for a while as it cut through the valley, then took a game trail across the meadow back toward the lane leading to the farmhouse. As they rounded the last bend, Ezra peered ahead, exclaiming, “Look! There’s Jeff now.”

Leah watched Jeff stride toward them down the lane. She could tell at a glance that he was angry. His long legs ate up the distance, and his fists were balled at his sides.

Leah’s voice betrayed her worry. “We’ve been gone longer than I thought, but he shouldn’t be

mad. He's the one who wanted to go hunting by himself while it was still dark." Jeff pointedly ignored Ezra and focused on Leah's face. "I've been looking for you."

"I'm glad you got back, Jeff. Did you get any rabbits?"

"A few," he said shortly. "I thought we were going fishing?"

"Oh, Jeff, I didn't think you would be back in time."

"I was back in plenty of time."

"Well, it's still not too late." She rested her hand on his arm. "Let's go later this afternoon when the sun's not so hot. We can catch a few before supper." Still grasping Jeff's arm, she turned to Ezra. "You can come too, Ezra."

"No, it's too late now." Jeff pulled his arm away, turned without another word, and loped down the road.

Leah whispered urgently, "Ezra, he's upset. Let me go talk to him." She ran quickly and caught up with Jeff, half skipping to keep up with his long strides. "Don't walk so fast," she pleaded, pulling on his arm to slow his pace.

Jeff paused, his face flushed. His lips were drawn tightly together, and he wouldn't look at her.

Leah bit her lip. She was annoyed. After all, he had been the one to leave and go hunting alone. Now she said sharply, "Jeff, don't be like that. We still have time to go fishing—and we can go run a trotline down by the rocks tonight."

"No, I guess not."

"You're just being stubborn." She pulled him to a stop, and he turned to face her.

What Jeff saw was a young woman of fourteen with green eyes and blonde hair. She was tall for a girl and had sometimes complained that she was as tall as a crane. Jeff noticed that she had filled out a great deal since he had left and had become far more like a young woman than the scrawny girl he had left behind.

He said shortly, "I don't know why you have to spend all your time with him!"

"Jeff, you're just being silly."

"I don't think it's silly. He's the enemy, Leah. He's fighting for the North."

"Well, so is Royal, if you'll remember. We've been over all this before. Besides, Ezra's not fighting for anybody now."

Hot words began to fall from their lips. Both had tempers, and, while they were growing up, more than one fiery argument had separated them for a time. They usually got over it pretty quickly, but this time Jeff refused to be pacified. Finally, he made a big mistake. He blurted out, "You're nothing but a Yankee, Leah Carter!"

This raised Leah's temper another notch, and she shot back, tears in her eyes, "Well, if I'm a Yankee, then you're nothing but a ragtag Rebel!" She turned and ran down the road toward the house.

He stood watching her go, feeling about as miserable as he ever had in his life, but he was too stubborn to admit it. "Well, if that's the way she wants to be, she can just have Ezra Payne and the whole Union army!"

2

“We Must Obey God!”

Jeff took his seat at the breakfast table, his face red and flushed from the vigorous washing he'd given it on the back porch. He didn't glance at Leah but bowed his head while Mr. Carter asked the blessing. As soon as the Amen was said, he allowed Mrs. Carter to fill his plate with eggs, ham, and fried potatoes. He began to eat at once, stubbornly keeping his eyes down.

Dan Carter didn't miss this and glanced at Leah, whose face was rather pale. Then he glanced at Ezra, who was eating more slowly than usual. “I sure am glad you've come to help,” he said cheerfully. “This place was going down quick. It needs a strong young man like you to keep it up.”

Ezra glanced up. “Why, I haven't gotten started yet, Mr. Carter. You just wait—I'll make this farm hum!”

Mary Carter smiled at the young man. “You're a good hand, Ezra. Never saw anyone work harder.”

“Well, I like to work on a farm.” Ezra smiled shyly. “Never was on such a nice place as this one.”

“I think you know every foot of it, Ezra,” Sarah said. She had said she liked Ezra from the start, and now added, “It makes a big difference having a man on the place.”

Leah glanced at Jeff and saw that he was looking down at his plate. They had ignored each other since their argument, and she was finally willing to

take the first step toward making up. “Jeff knows the farm as well as anybody,” she offered, but Jeff didn’t lift his eyes.

Her mother, always very observant, said, “Have some more pancakes, Jeff.”

“No, ma’am, I’ve got plenty.”

“Why, you *never* have enough of my pancakes! Are you feeling sick?”

“No, Mrs. Carter,” Jeff mumbled. “Just not very hungry, I guess. They’re real good—like always.”

Dan Carter studied the boy, then let his eyes run around the table. “Ed Rayburn came by last night,” he said. “He brought the paper from Lexington. A couple of days old now, but I’ve been studying it.”

Mary Carter seemed to catch a note in her husband’s voice and looked at him quickly. “What does it say about the war, Dan?”

“It says here that General Pope didn’t do so well against the Confederates. He got whipped pretty bad. He claimed he was going to go down and win the war right off. But he didn’t do it.”

Jeff’s face flushed, and he flared out, “We’ll see about that! He’ll have to settle it with Marse Robert first.” General Robert E. Lee was commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. “There have been other generals who have tried to whip him and Stonewall.”

“That may be so,” Dan said agreeably. With so many neighbors on both sides of the war issue, it was hard to keep a balance. There had been no better neighbors than Nelson Majors and his family, and Dan was determined now to avoid an argument with Jeff. “One thing I know is that I’ve got to get on down the road. Those boys will be needing all kinds of things when they head South again.”

“You’re not fit to go. You’re not well, Dan.”

Dan Carter shook his head slowly in response to his wife’s plea, “A man has to do what he thinks is right. I think God’s told me to be all that I can to our soldier boys, and we have to obey God. That’s what the Bible says.”

Jeff looked up quickly. He loved Dan Carter and respected him as much as a boy could. Still, the war had somehow divided them. He said little during the talk that followed and tried to slip away as soon as he could.

Sarah caught him at the door. “Are you and Leah going fishing today, Jeff?”

“Not today.”

“Why, Jeff, I never knew you to turn down a chance to go fishing!”

“Just not in the mood, I reckon.”

Sarah stared at him strangely. “You sure you’re feeling all right, Jeff?”

“I’m all right. Don’t fuss over me!” He turned and left the house, his back stiff and his face set.

As Leah and Sarah were washing the dishes, Sarah mentioned Jeff. “I guess he’s sad to have to go back. He was real short with me just now.”

“He’s not feeling well.”

“I think he’s angry, Leah. Did you two have a fight?”

Leah kept her eyes down. “He was mad because I went hunting for birds’ eggs with Ezra.”

“Oh, I see.”

Leah looked up with grief in her eyes. “I didn’t mean to hurt his feelings, Sarah,” she protested. “I didn’t think he’d be back in time to go, so I just went with Ezra.”

“I see.”

Catching an odd note in her sister's voice, Leah glanced at her. "Was I wrong?"

"No, Leah, but you ought to see Jeff's side of things. Boys are funny sometimes."

"They sure are!"

Sarah smiled and washed another dish. "But so are girls," she added quietly.

Leah looked miserable. She dried the plate in her hand, put it on the shelf without speaking, then complained, "I don't want to be quarreling with Jeff. He's my best friend."

"Try to make up with him," Sarah urged gently. "He might be gone for a long time. You never know what's going to happen when there's war." Her voice caught at the end, and Leah knew she was thinking, *Will I ever see Tom again?*

Leah glanced at her sister. "You're thinking about Tom, aren't you?" Her entire family knew how Sarah felt about Tom, even though she didn't talk much about him.

"I guess I was—a little," Sarah admitted. "I get so afraid for him sometimes, Leah!"

"I know, Sarah. But he'll come back when the war's over." She saw her sister's somber expression, quickly returned the last cup to the shelf, and gave her a quick hug. Then she turned and left the house for her outdoor chores, which included feeding the chickens.

She scooped a small sackful of feed from the barrel just inside the barn, crossed to the hen yard, and began to scatter it in a wide arc as she walked, calling, "Chick, chick, chick!"

The chickens came running from all directions, clucking loudly and gathering around her feet. They pecked vigorously at the feed.

Leah was startled when a voice said, "You look like you're floating in a sea of chickens, Leah."

Looking up, she saw that Ezra had come to watch. He stood there with an ax in his hand, his face wet with sweat from chopping wood.

"Seems a shame to have to chop wood, seeing it's as hot as it is," she said.

"I always say wood heats you up twice. Once when you chop it, then again when you burn it. You'll like it pretty well when winter comes."

Leah giggled. "I never thought of it that way before."

Ezra waded carefully through the sea of chickens that scolded at him. A big rooster lunged at his feet, pecking and squawking angrily. Ezra hooked its plump body under one boot toe and tossed it harmlessly into the crowd of hens. "Go take care of your women, rooster!"

He stopped in front of Leah and looked at her with a thoughtful expression. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

"About what, Ezra?"

"About Jeff."

"I don't want to talk about him. He's an old sore-head!" She flung a handful of seed hard against the henhouse.

Ezra shook his head. "That's no way for you to talk. How many times have you told me that you two have been best friends since you were kids?"

"Well, we were. But why does he have to be so . . . so . . ."

Ezra reached into her bag and pulled out a handful of feed. He began scattering it, watching as the multicolored chickens scrambled in the dust, fighting each other. Turning to her, he said, "I guess

all of us act a little bad sometimes, Leah. I know I do. Don't hold it against Jeff."

Ezra's honesty brought a flush to Leah's face, but it didn't erase her hurt feelings. She shook her head stubbornly. "He's got to learn how to behave around young ladies. He's behaving like a child."

He said suddenly, "If it hadn't been for you, I'd probably be back in a prison camp or maybe even dead. I was pretty sick."

"It wasn't much, Ezra."

"Yes, it was. I'll never forget that, Leah."

She looked at him swiftly. She had wondered at times if she had done the right thing—helping a Union soldier to escape and then involving a Confederate drummer boy, Jeff, in the plot. But now, looking at Ezra and seeing the happy contentment on his face and seeing how much he had already recovered from his devastating illness, she knew she had. "I didn't do all that much," she said.

"Yes, you did." Ezra nodded. "I owe you a lot, but I still think you ought to be a little more understanding about Jeff. A best friend is hard to find—or replace."

"He doesn't have to be so mean!"

"Jeff's got a hard row to hoe."

"So do Royal and Tom. But they don't act like soreheads! Jeff could be nice, at least."

"He's not happy, Leah, and being here he doesn't even have the war to keep his mind off what's troubling him." Ezra took some more feed and scattered it. "He's got to go back to the war. All he sees is that I'll be here enjoying the farm and being with you."

"He doesn't care about that."

"You're wrong there, Leah," Ezra said mildly. "He's jealous."

“Jealous?” Leah shot him an astonished glance. “Why, he doesn’t like me that much!”

Ezra shook his head. “He sure does. I think you ought to be a little nicer to him, Leah. He’s leaving tomorrow, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but he’s got to apologize before I give in to him,” she said firmly. She finished feeding the chickens, shook the last few kernels out of the sack, left the hen yard, and waved the sack in a bright farewell to Ezra, who hefted his ax and headed back to the woodlot.

All day she thought about what Ezra had said. Finally she was all set to forgive and forget, just as soon as Jeff came and apologized, as any reasonable, civilized boy should. The day wore on, however, with no sign of Jeff. Leah watched the sun dip below the tree line and sighed. *Men!*

Matthew Henderson came for supper. He was a short, round young man whose earnest face clearly showed the crush he had on Sarah. He never would have been so bold as to try for Sarah before the war; but when Tom left, he figured he wouldn’t get a better chance. Not every man went off to war—people such as Matt, who ran his father’s sawmill, had to stay at home to keep up supplies.

Leah whispered to Ezra, “He’s trying to court Sarah. He’s been sweet on her for a long time.”

“Does she like him?” Ezra whispered back.

“No, not really. All she can think about is Tom Majors.” Leah shook her head. “He better go on back home. Matt Henderson’s wasting his time with Sarah.”

After supper, Henderson managed to persuade Sarah to go for a walk. Leah watched the two step off the porch and into the evening shadows and

scoffed to Ezra, "Sarah's too polite. You wouldn't catch me walking in the moonlight with some boy I wasn't sweet on. Sarah may call me rude, but at least I don't let my manners lead some fool boy on!"

Sarah soon regretted her kindness, for Matt paused halfway down the path to the creek, quickly grasped both her hands, and pulled her toward him for a kiss.

She drew back and pushed him away. "Don't do that, Matthew Henderson!"

"Why not? You know how I feel about you," Matt protested. "I want to marry you."

"No, Matt, that's out of the question. I just don't care for you like that."

Matt argued, "My ma and pa didn't hardly know each other before they were hitched, and they learned to care for each other. We can too. You just gotta put your mind to it. You know I'll be good to you." He stared at her accusingly. "I know what's wrong with you. You're in love with that Tom Majors."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Sarah, that won't do any good." Matt shook his head. "Look at it like this—if the North loses, which it won't, that would be a whole new country in Virginia, and Tom would want to live there, not back here in Kentucky. But Kentucky—this is your home. You can't go chasing off after him and leave your whole family and friends. The South is going to lose eventually. Then what would it be like if you were married to Tom? You think any Confederate veteran's going to get fair treatment? Besides that, you've got a brother in the Union army. What if something happens to Royal? You'd blame Tom for it."

“I don’t want to talk about it, Matt!” Sarah said abruptly. She didn’t need Matthew Henderson telling her what she had already agonized over many nights.

Sarah whirled around on the path and almost ran back to the house.

Matt followed more slowly, and she heard him talking with her parents for a few minutes on the porch before he bade them good night and set off for home.

Later, as Sarah and Leah cleaned the kitchen and filled the wood box for early morning baking, apparently Leah couldn’t resist asking about Matt. “I guess he wanted to come courting, didn’t he?”

“Oh, I suppose so, but I’m not interested in that.” Sarah deliberately turned away and began to vigorously scrub the already spotless counter.

“I sure wish I had one boy I was sweet on and another sweet on me. You sure are lucky, Sarah. Are you going to hold out and marry Tom when the war’s over?”

Sarah grew flustered. “It’s too soon to talk about things like that. I don’t know—the war may go on for another five years.”

“It can’t last that long,” Leah protested with the innocence of youth.

“I just don’t know. Don’t pester me about it, Leah.”

Later, at evening Bible reading, Dan noticed that his oldest daughter was moody, but he decided to let her work it out on her own. After he had read from Scripture and explained what he thought it meant, he closed the big, old family Bible and began to talk about his plans.

"I've made up my mind to go again," he said quietly. "I know I'm not in the best of health, but God and Leah will go with me."

"I'll take care of you, Pa," Leah said. "We'll get along."

"I really don't think you should go this time, Dan," Mrs. Carter protested. "You had a bad spell two weeks ago. Suppose you have one while you're out in the camp?"

"I'd take care of him, Ma," Leah repeated. "He's had them before when we've been out, and we did just fine."

"You're a fine young woman, Leah," her mother said. "You do very well with cooking and caring for your father, but there's things only your father can do. And I worry about you too, a young girl in those rough camps with all those soldiers."

The family discussion went back and forth. Jeff took no part in it but sat leaning against the wall, his chair tilted back. He himself felt Mr. Carter was making a mistake, but he was not really family, and he sure didn't feel like chiming in on their affairs tonight. He kept watching Leah, stealing glances at her. Once their eyes met, but they both glanced away quickly.

"Well, I've never tried to tell you what to do, Dan," Mrs. Carter said. "That's not a wife's place, but this time I think it would be foolish for you to go. You're just not able. You're not as strong now as you were the last time you went out, and you struggled the whole time."

"I'll go with them, Mrs. Carter."

Every eye turned on Ezra, who, like Jeff, had remained silent until now. He added quickly, "I can do the driving and cut the wood, and even bargain

with the soldiers. All Mr. Carter will have to do is order me and Leah around and do his preaching.”

“Why, you can’t do that, Ezra,” Leah interrupted. “We’re counting on you to keep the farm up and watch Mother and Sarah.”

“I surely would feel better, knowing Ezra was helping you, Dan.” Mrs. Carter’s voice brightened. “And you said Ray Studdard was looking for extra work. You were going to hire him before Ezra came.”

“I was hoping that with Ezra I wouldn’t have to dip into our savings to pay Ray . . . but I could use Ezra’s help on the way . . . and Ray is a good hand.” He nodded. “Are you sure you want to go, Ezra?”

“I guess this Mr. Studdard can take care of the farm. Not as good as I could.” Ezra grinned. He turned to Mr. Carter and said, “I’d really like to go. It would give me a chance to show how much I appreciate what you’ve done for me.”

Mrs. Carter broke in. “If you’ve got to go, Dan, I insist you take Ezra with you. If you do need help, he’ll be there. Between the two of them, Ezra and Leah can make things about as good as they can be on a journey like that.”

In the end the Carters all agreed. Ezra would go along with Dan and Leah. The three would have the best supply and Bible preaching business around.

Dan smiled at his helpers. “Well, looks like I’m just going to be taken care of like a king.”

Leah went over and hugged him. “You deserve it, Pa. You just sit back and tell Ezra and me what to do, and we’ll take care of you.”

No one seemed to notice that Jeff had said nothing during the entire discussion and that the scowl on his face had deepened with each passing minute.

Later he silently climbed the ladder to the attic room he bunked in. In slow motion he stripped to his underwear and collapsed on the narrow cot under the eaves. For hours he lay awake, staring out the single window at the full moon. No one heard his quiet plea, "If You're there, God, why don't You help me like You do Mr. Carter?"

Jeff would have given almost anything to be the one to travel with Dan and Leah—without Ezra. But he wouldn't give up his loyalty to his father, and that meant returning to the army with the supplies. Life just wasn't fair, and God didn't seem to care about the Majors family as He did about the Carters.

The next morning at breakfast Jeff announced that he was leaving immediately to rejoin his father. His wagon was hitched to the front porch, and his mules were fed and watered.

"Jeff, it's Sunday. Please go to church with us first," urged Dan. "It's your last chance to say good-bye to your old neighbors."

"No, sir, thank you just the same. I need to get an early start," Jeff replied without quite meeting the older man's gaze. "I'm thanking you, and my father is too, for all you've done for Esther and for us, but I've got to go."

"Why, it can't make that much difference in your travel time, son," Mrs. Carter urged. "And you don't know when you'll get as fiery a sermon as you will from Preacher Edwards."

"Thanks, Mr. and Mrs. Carter, but I'll just be on my way."

A few minutes later Jeff brought his bedroll and pack down from the attic and threw them behind

the wagon seat. The wagonload of corn, oats, and salt pork would make a big difference to the troops.

He and Leah had helped Ezra escape by offering to go after supplies and “hiding” him in plain sight in the wagon. Sometimes he wished he’d never given in to Leah and helped Ezra, but at least his father’s troops would get the benefit.

He said good-bye to everyone, nodding to Leah and mumbling an emotionless “Good-bye, Leah” to her. He climbed up on the seat and barked out the order for his mules to move out. He’d not gotten far, however, when he heard a voice calling. He slowed and looked back to see Leah run up beside the wagon. “Whoa!” he said, and the mules drew to an abrupt halt.

“I just wanted to really say good-bye.” Leah looked up at Jeff nervously. “I wish you didn’t have to go.” She half raised her hand toward him, then let it drop to her side.

Jeff’s hurt erupted in his voice. “You’ve already said that, and so have I. We just don’t get what we want sometimes, do we?”

Leah bit her lip, for his tone was curt. “Jeff, don’t be so mean to me.”

“Mean? I’m not mean!”

Jeff didn’t know if he wanted to be mean or sorry, but somehow it seemed easier to be mean. He’d always been proud, hating to admit he was wrong; and now he wanted more than anything to get off the wagon and take her hands and tell her he’d been wrong and foolish, but somehow he couldn’t do it.

“It . . . might be a long time before you come back,” Leah half whispered.

“I’ll be all right.”

“You can’t know that. Anyone can get hurt in a battle.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jeff muttered.

Leah seemed fully aware that her entire family, and Ezra too, were watching from the yard. If they had been alone, he thought she might have reached out and taken his arm and said what was in her heart. She, too, must be sorry and hating the argument that they’d had.

But people were watching, and he figured she couldn’t bring herself to be the first to give in, in front of them. She didn’t say more than, “Well, I hope you have a safe trip.” Then she turned and walked away, her face stiff.

Jeff stared at her straight back, fought the urge to jump down and run after her, and instead turned angrily around, gritted his teeth, and yelled, “Git up!”

The mules, startled as much by his jerk on the reins as by his shout, jumped forward into their harnesses, abruptly pulling the heavy wagon into the lane.

As they finally rounded the bend and the house faded away behind the trees, Jeff slammed his fist against the wagon seat, frustrated and angry. “Why do I have to be such a stubborn, no-account fool!”