

## THE PUPS' FIRST HUNT

By Robert D. Culp

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**SOON** as supper was over and Pa started collecting things, I knew it was time to go. “Rooster, get yourself ready,” he called, but I had already scooted out the back door to halloo at Cotton. There was an answer—two shorts and a warbling long, our special code—then Cotton came busting down the slope from his place.

Pa whistled for Flitter, and she loped out of the barn, her half-grown pups scrambling after her in such a tumble, you couldn’t count them for sure. Not that it mattered; those seven pups stuck together like a swarm of bees. And it was a good thing, or Pa wouldn’t have been willing to take them on their first coon hunt so young.

We raised one litter of pups a year—that’s all we could afford to feed—so Pa said we got to aim for quality, not quantity. Pa’s best friend Silas had both. He had more than fifty hounds—the best—but he was well-fixed to support them. His land ran down Big Little Creek a mile and then some, and spread across two ridges. Pa was the only man Silas treated as his equal when it came to hounds, and his invitation to take the pups out on their first hunt signaled that Flitter’s offspring were blue ribbon. Cotton and I were invited, too, and that’s why we didn’t have to be called twice.

“We going by Uncle Jake’s first?” asked Cotton.

“Yeah, then we’ll pick up Silas,” I said. “Let’s go. Pa can catch up.” Cotton took off ahead of me.

Uncle Jake wasn’t my uncle, and he wasn’t Cotton’s either. Fact is, I never did find anyone who could claim him for real, but everybody called him uncle just the same. He lived by himself in a rickety one-room shack shingled over with smashed-flat tin cans and made a fair living with a little farming and a lot of hunting and fishing. Unlike most grownups, there was nothing he liked better than having a couple of kids underfoot, so Cotton and I knew the way to Uncle Jake’s with our eyes shut: up a twisty path leading across two sawtooth ridges to Big Little Creek. This time we shortcut all the switchbacks and got there with Pa trailing far behind.

“Hold up a sec,” I said. Cotton was out of breath, too, but neither of us would admit it. “See if we can spot Uncle Jake from here.”

“There’s black smoke from his chimney,” said Cotton. He jumped up on a rock ledge so he could see more of the place. “He’s banking the fire, getting ready to go.”

While Cotton was stretching his neck from atop the ledge, I cut on down the hill. I felt fox-smart, tricking him out of that head start.

I said Uncle Jake lived alone; that’s not quite true. He had a wiley old redbone hound named Bogus that lived with him. One look at Bogus, with his head cocked over and a question in his eyes, and you knew that dog felt a cut above any human. That opinion wasn’t shared by anyone else, except maybe Uncle Jake. In the first place, Bogus was ugly. His red coat was grizzled with old age and scarred by a million battles, and every rip had been repaired with coarse white hair as if nature had run out of red thread. His ears looked as though they’d been trimmed with Ma’s pinking shears, and a large scallop missing from his upper lip gave him a fake snarl that scared off strangers and got him into fights with the other hounds.

In the second place, Bogus hopped along on three legs, touching his ailing hind leg to the ground as seldom as possible. But the hound’s honesty was in doubt. One day he favored the right hind leg, another day the left, though he was smart enough to stay with the same game leg while anyone was watching. And when the dogs were out on a scent, Bogus always wound up at the head of the pack. That gimpy leg never held him back then.

“Hey, up! Uncle Jake!” I hollered down at the old shack. Cotton crashed through the redberry and scrub oak a jump behind me.

“Hurry, you rascals,” answered a croaky voice. “Sun’s going down.” A fuzzy gray beard poked out of the door, and then Bogus pushed between Uncle Jake’s legs and greeted us with a string of howls.

“We’re not the pokey ones, Uncle Jake,” I said. “Pa’s way behind us.” But just then I heard Pa’s halloo, and Flitter and the seven younguns came rushing down to nose Bogus.

“It’s getting shadowy along the bottoms,” said Pa without much pause for breath. “You ready, Uncle Jake?”

“Been waiting,” he answered.

“It’s late, so we’ll stick to the creek path,” said Pa. “That’ll mean passing by Garvey’s place, much as I’d rather not.” He turned to Cotton and me. “You two stay right next to me now. I don’t want any trouble with Garvey.”

To get to Silas’s place we had to follow Big Little Creek downstream about a mile, past where Little Little Creek ran into it. Silas lived right in the creek bottom, just below the fork. It was a splendiferous spot to hunt. But smack dab between Uncle

Jake's shack and Silas's cabin lived the meanest, orneriest, most cantankerous, and infernally wickedest old coot that ever held a bad thought. His name was Garvey Bockenweiler, and he hated kids, dogs, and just about everything else that breathed.

Cotton and I had strict orders never to go near Garvey's worn-out farm, but we didn't need to be told. We avoided that place like death. Going from Uncle Jake's to Silas's we always detoured atop the ridge and spoke in whispers even when the only thing we could see of Garvey was the smoke from his chimney.

We felt better with Pa along, but Cotton and I still got awfully quiet when we came in sight of Garvey's house. Bogus and Flitter squeezed up close to us. Those crazy pups, though, they didn't have a lick of sense. All seven of them went splashing through Big Little Creek and started rambling around Garvey's barnyard like a gaggle of geese looking for corn.

"Hush!" said Pa, seeing I was about to call the pups. "They'll follow if we move on downstream. Skeedaddle!" Pa gave me and Cotton each a cuff on the rear, and we did skeedaddle. Bogus and Flitter trotted alongside, Flitter casting worried looks back at her offspring.

Well, it would have worked slick as a willow whistle except for one thing: As the pups noticed us disappearing down the path and came bolting across the yard in one big tangle, they passed Garvey's henhouse and disturbed one of nature's best chicken thieves in the middle of his early evening's work. He must have been the boldest bobcat in forty states; it wasn't halfway dark yet!

Old man bobcat had just started out the henhouse door carrying a fresh-killed Plymouth Rock pullet, when he ran head-on into those seven pups. Right away he put on the brakes and ducked back into the henhouse. That might have been a mistake. Those fool pups let out a chain of yelps and piled in after him, wiggling and scraping through the tiny door until all seven had disappeared inside. Of course, every chicken in the place woke up and protested. Such a squawking and yelping and howling—that henhouse shook like the walls of Jericho.

Just when I thought it would explode, out popped the bobcat, still lugging his dead chicken. Right behind him came the pups and the surviving chickens, spewing out the door like a bodacious sneeze. The bobcat only got as far as the hitching post by Garvey's porch, leaped to the top, and glared down at the circling pups, his wide eyes sparks of yellow. Each time a pup raised up to snap at him, that bobcat would stretch out a paw and stripe the dog's nose with his razor claws. Lucky for those yapping pups, old man bobcat didn't want to drop his dinner.

All of us—Bogus and Flitter included—stood stock still and stared bug-eyed. Cotton and I woke up first and started straight for the action. But before I took two steps, I was walking on air.

“Hold on, heroes,” said Pa, his left hand dangling me three feet off the ground by the seat of my britches. I looked over, and there was Cotton hanging from Pa’s right hand. “You two stay put. That bobcat’ll run soon as old Garvey comes out.”

So we hung there watching. I heard a growl below me and saw that Flitter was trembling like a willow leaf. Now a good hound won’t light out after anything until the boss gives his leave, but those pups were her own flesh and blood! When one of them let out a really loud wail, Flitter’s mother instinct beat out her training. She flashed into the yard like a hornet protecting the nest. Bogus, who never did behave like a decent hound, was at her heels.

Before I could suck in a breath, Flitter and Bogus were on opposite sides of the hitching post, rearing up and taking turns nipping the bobcat’s hind end. That cat must have figured he was up against experience. His fur stood straight out and his stubby tail jerked around like a club. He dropped the pullet, arched his back, spit twice, and gave one rail-splitting, blood-stopping, cream-curdling yowl. Then he jumped—clean over Flitter and the pups—landing on the porch with a thump just as Garvey Bockenweiler came out of the house.

Garvey had his double-barreled shotgun at the ready. For a second he stood there gawking. That was all it took. Old man bobcat sprang between Garvey’s legs and vanished into the house; seven gangly pups and two full-grown hounds charged after him. It took some jostling for all of them to get through the door, what with Garvey blocking the way and all, and this seemed to put the old man off his balance. He sat down hard in the doorway, looking stupified. Then, sort of as an afterthought, he pulled both triggers and blew a two-foot hole smack through the porch roof.

Inside the house there was an infernal commotion: yelps and howls and snarls and yowls mixed in with pots banging and dishes smashing. It didn’t last long, though. As Garvey went in the front door, the bobcat came crashing through the kitchen window, followed by old Bogus. Then Flitter and the pups broke out the bottom half of the back screen door, and the whole mess of them roared up the ridge single file.

Meanwhile, Garvey had gathered his wits and reloaded. When he saw them disappearing into the trees, he cut loose, blasting out the top half of the screen door. That was all he hit. Howsomedever, Garvey wasn’t one to give up. The last I could see, he was charging after the bobcat and hounds, firing into the dark as fast as he could load.

All this while Pa had been holding Cotton and me by the britches. He wasn’t showing off; he’d just forgotten about us. Now he plopped us onto the path. “All right, boys, show’s over,” he said. “Let’s get on to Silas’s. He’ll be wondering what happened to us.”

For a long time, as we felt our way down the darkening path, we could hear the hounds sounding and Garvey banging away at the shadows.

When we got to Silas's we all agreed there was no point in going coon hunting, since the main reason had been to break in the pups. So we built a roaring great fire under the stars, stuck hunks of cheese on hickory switches, and toasted them over the flames. Silas filled a skillet with pecan halves and roasted them on the coals. Then he perked coffee and heated a pot of hot chocolate, too. Cotton and I squatted by the fire, stuffing our bellies and listening to the grownups swap lies.

Along midnight, Bogus came dragging in to the clearing. He must have caught that bobcat more than was smart, because he was clawed up something fierce. Ten minutes later, as Uncle Jake was tending to his old hound, Flitter and all seven pups showed up. Aside from the bloody noses, the pups were in fine shape, and Flitter looked mighty pleased with her brood.

The next morning Cotton and I woke up and found ourselves in Silas's cabin. After breakfast, Uncle Jake and Bogus slipped off, and Pa and Cotton and I headed home the roundabout way. All of us avoided Garvey's place for weeks afterwards, and we never did find out what he thought happened that night.