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SIXTEEN YEAR OLD REBEL

Leola Higgins

"There is no way you can talk me out of this, Benny." The words, angry and emphatic, were spoken by one of the two young men glaring at each other in the side yard of a large weather beaten house. A rail fence cross-stitched itself around the house, log stable and other outbuildings in the clearing. Trees, tender green in their April foliage, surrounded the homestead on three sides.

"Now, Denson, you are just sixteen and we need you here," said Benny in a conciliatory tone.

"Remember, Benny, Pa asked you before he died to be head of the family and as for me being too young--you wkon't be eighteen 'til August and I'm as tall and strong as you. Nobody can make me stay!" Denson's cheeks reddened and his hands clenched into fists.

Benny's face was serious as he asked sadly, "Denson A. Dunn, would you have me fist fight you about this? I heard Ma say your name couldn't have been anything but Denson A. 'cause you're the spitting image of Grandpa Dees. She said he wasn't afraid of man or beast and you are just like him. You've got a foot itch too like great-grandpa Sampson Dees when he left North Carolina after the Revolutionary War and landed in the western wilderness of Kentucky."

"I'm right proud to be like grandpa Dees," retorted Denson, "and I'm proud of my name--so why don't you let me grow up and be the man he was? Marion is fifteen years old and growing fast. Why can't he take my place?"

"Denson, can't you see, that's part of the problem here? We've all had to grow up too soon. Ma died last March, just thirteen months ago and Pa five months later and then Andrew in October. This job is too big for us. Rachel is just twelve and tries hard to keep up with the cooking, washing, and ironing for the eight of us."

"Liza has the hardest part," Denson interrupted sharply, "she fetches and carries for Rachel all day whilst running after the little 'uns and she's just eight years old."

"I know that," agreed Benny, "but did you know George still cries for Pa and Ma sometimes? Martha and Sarah are too little to remember their Pappy and Mammy. We should all stay together and help each other." There was a pleading look in his eyes but his voice held firm.

Denson thrust out his jaw and asked, arms akimbo, "Tell me, Benny, are you staying around until little Sarah grows up and marries? Remember she's just two years old."

Benny dropped his head, digging his toe into scattered chips from the nearby woodpile.

"You are not talking, Benny. I've seen you making sheep's eyes at little Laura Lindsey and she's just fourteen. Do you think she'll be willing to marry you in say a couple of years, live here and help take care of the young ones?"

Benny's head drooped lower and still toeing the chips, he muttered, "I don't know. She's not been asked."

"Well," said Denson, "there's something I've got to tell you. Blaze and me took a long ride yesterday while I thought over things. We met Uncle Zeke up at the crossroads. He was riding over to talk to you. Maybe I am purely Dees and maybe that's the reason he talked to me instead, Uncle Zeke being Ma's favorite brother."

"Well, D.A.," interrupted Benny, "What did he tell you?"

"I'm getting to it," replied Denson. "Uncle Zeke said the Dees and Dunn kin think it would be better if the Marshall County Court appoints guardians for all of us and finds us homes with Pa's and Ma's brothers and sisters."

Denson tried to read the differing emotions that played across his brother's face.

"Denson, you know what I promised Pa," said Benny stubbornly.

"Yes, but seems like its not working too good for us, Benny."

"Has Uncle Zeke already talked to the other kinfolks? Have they decided who will go where?"

"Course he has. Aunt Eliza and Uncle John Tubbs want baby Sarah. Remember Aunt Celia and Uncle James Burnham wanted Martha when Ma died but Pa couldn't stand to give her up. Benny, don't you think Pa would say yes now, if he could?"

"Yes, and she'll have good raising, Uncle James being a preacher. But," mused Benny, "she'll be lonesome for awhile 'cause they don't have children for her to grow up with."

"She'll miss us at first Benny but that will pass," said Denson wistfully.

Silently his brother turned and walked toward the stable. He was back in minutes astride a bright bay with a splash of white on his face. The horse stood quietly while Denson went inside. Hurrying out looking neither right nor left, he leaped into the saddle.

Benny, without moving, watched his brother on the galloping Blaze. Just before they reached the bend in the road Denson's hand lifted in a quick salute.

Benny turned, conscious of two sounds, the thudding hoofbeats on the loose planks on Cypress Creek bridge and Liza's tearful voice calling from the doorway, "Denson, come back, Denny." He went to comfort his sister

swiping angrily at the tears on his face.

Around the bend and down the road Denson pulled up Blaze near a grove of trees on the right. He dismounted and went to stand by three mounds under a cedar. He remembered the day last August when he and Benny looked for their father after a summer storm. They found him here by the grave of their mother, soaked to the skin and racked with fever. The two of them carried him home to die. Denson shook his head and muttered, "Good-bye Ma, good-bye Pa, and Andrew." Walking back to the horse he said, "Let's go, Blaze."

It was Wednesday, April 27, 1864, when Denson A. Dunn, riding Blaze, galloped down Main Street in Benton, Kentucky, to volunteer for the Confederacy. Co. A 3rd Regt. Inf. (Mounted)

Pvt. D.A. Dunn answered roll call for May and June and was reported wounded in the Battle of Harrisburg, Mississippi, July 13 to 15, 1864..

The National Archives, Washington, D.C., have no record of either his burial place or any Military Cemetery Services, nor does the U.D.C. of the State of Mississippi.

