

THE FERNS

WHENEVER DANNY PLAYED in the green tunnel below, trouble dwindled to a pod. His new guardian, Uncle Ted, was tall and gruff and very strong, with a solemn manner that darkened the hill-top house. This house was home since the accident orphaned him, yet Danny spent more time outdoors. His vine-covered passage ran from the river to the dirt road. Few cars travelled the road; for Danny, the tunnel made a cool refuge on the hottest days, where birds spoke in riddles from hidden nests. August was droning to an end. While grapes ripened in the tunnel, Danny could not pick them without permission. Even Aunt Ruth grudged him permission.

Ruth and his mother had been sisters. A plump, red-haired, childless woman, Ruth became quiet and pale the moment Ted entered the house. At first, she tried to interfere, to lessen the discipline that surrounded Danny. 'Discipline' was a word Ted favored, but Ruth, now that summer trailed in the dust, raised fewer protests. She likewise feared Ted. If Danny forgot about lunch, however, she would stroll down-hill, calling him in mournful tones. Danny always minded her, yet lunch with his uncle present was a silent, brief and awkward catechism.

Today a burning sun penetrated the vines. When Danny felt its glare, he guessed that noon had come. He was not hungry. He was squatting in the tunnel when he heard a voice nearby. While the voice was loud, the words sounded harsh and alien. Danny crept to one of his 'windows' and peeked out. A man stooped beside the stone wall that bordered the road, in that damp spot where maidenhair ferns rose in tall profusion. Ferns concealed the head; the body in a shapeless black suit was thick, square, and short. The bulging sack on a shoulder strap belonged to the man, but this property belonged to Ted. Yes, and the ferns that the trespasser tore out by the roots were among the plants Ted prized most.

Danny wanted to cry. He had cried often since the accident, especially at night in his room with the door shut. He had cried when Ted killed a chicken for supper.

He had cried at finding a dead squirrel or plundered nest in the woods. He was much alone; the mere sight of the black-clad man so quickly and efficiently uprooting ferns brought tears close. The man moved toward the wall, destroying as he went. Reaching the wall, he stuffed an armful of ferns into the sack. His face was fat and white, but the fierce mustache alarmed Danny the most, and he ducked below the 'window' to huddle against the earth.

What was this intruder muttering? His strange words buzzed, as if he were angry with himself, or with the cool, green ferns. As he confronted a fresh clump, Danny molded fear into dislike. He waited until the man bent down, then crawled through the tunnel and scrambled over the wall without dislodging a single stone. Crossing the road, Danny sped uphill on bare feet, a tanned splinter of boy in sneakers and khaki shorts, his yellow hair that needed cutting bleached in spots.

"Aunt Ruth!" he shouted through the kitchen door. "Aunt Ruth, there's a man in the field below, stealing our ferns . . ."

Although Ruth opened the door, it was Ted who leaned into the sunlight. Nosed by the shadow, Danny measured the darkness, and blinked at its maker.

"He's across the road with a bag, taking all the ferns—just helping himself, Uncle Ted."

"Lunch is ready, boys," Ruth interrupted.

"Lunch be damned!" Ted pushed out the screen door, secured Danny. "Let's go and surprise this fellow. Let's catch him with the goods, and fix him proper!"

Danny tried to twist free as Ted marched him over the lawn to the barn. Ted left him to enter the harness room, but soon reappeared with his gun. Last night, Danny recalled, Ted had shot three crows in the garden. "Black thieves," was his sole comment. He did not check the gun load, but gripped Danny again and started for the river.

"W-what you going to do, Uncle Ted? Kill him?"

"Maybe—if he gets notions."

"But, Uncle Ted, why does he want ferns?"

"He doesn't. Florists wrap them around the flowers they sell. Last summer I caught several of these chaps. Red-handed!"

As they reached the huge oak in which he had begun a tree-house, Danny pondered the meaning of 'red-handed.' Ferns were green and cool in the hand. Ferns never bled, or gave off sap like the milk-weed. Scarlet images overwhelmed Danny. He stopped so suddenly that Ted lost his grip.

"Don't shoot him, Uncle Ted. He'll go away. He doesn't even know you're mad at him . . ."

"Mad?" Ted snickered. "Every field and boundary is posted, but this chap probably can't read. Let's teach him to read, Danny. Let's give him a lesson."

The grimness of that mouth alerted Danny. As his uncle prepared to clutch him anew, Danny jumped clear and raced down-hill. Ted shouted in surprise, raised the gun when Danny glanced back. Not daring to pause, Danny leaped over bushes, scratched his legs on thorns, stumbled but kept his balance. His heat outdrummed the noise of his feet. At the road, he stood confused and winded. He might have slipped over the wall and through the tunnel, yet he waited indecisive beneath the warm sun. His uncle broke from the bushes, gasping with annoyance.

"Now, that was a fool trick! What's wrong with you, kid?"

Ted scowled, crouched, whirled on his heel and dashed for the opening in the wall. Stunned by the reprimand, Danny followed later to find his uncle engaged with a gabbling, excited captive.

Helpless, the man knelt among ferns while the gun pointed at him. As Danny tiptoed nearer in a wide circle, the man squeaked with fear. His waving arms dispelled the core of dislike. His quivering mustache divided the broad face beneath an old fedora hat. Marble eyes shifted in appeal to Danny, who wince at the savage, unprovoked kick Ted delivered.

"On your feet, mister! I'm going to turn you in. It's jail—understand?"

The Italian tripped in rising, fell hard, rolled on plump hips like an oversize beetle. Danny's laughter stifled beneath Ted's cloud of rage. Birds no longer argued over grape luncheons. Light narrowed as Ted beckoned, and Danny stepped forward.

"You stay here, Danny. Guard him with the gun. He's not to budge an inch."

"Me?"

"You!" The mocking tone dropped to a confidential whisper. "Don't worry. The gun isn't loaded, but we can scare him out of his wits before the sheriff comes. Okay, Danny?"

Danny nodded at his uncle. A thin nose and pinched-in nostrils were set above a long, well-shaped upper lip and cleft chin. The piercing gray eyes were enough to insure obedience. Danny pouted at the grass caressing his toes.

"You were a witness, Danny. He even pulled out the roots. It's a crime—a crime against nature!"

Danny squirmed as the lecture continued. Ted could name each shrub, animal or insect on his land. It had been fun to ramble with him in the woods, or along the roads after a storm, when toads and grasshoppers were out. There was

a special garden for song-birds, which Ted had planted with mixed grain, but now Danny shrivelled with vague distress, and the day felt cold.

"All right, then. Here's the gun, Danny. If he makes a move, shoot!"

The Italian quailed as the gun changed hands. Stock and barrel were unwieldy, but Danny, with the devotion of his twelve years, knew how cowboys and hunters held guns. As Ted strode from the scene, Danny took charge. He was a veteran scout, guarding a treacherous Cheyenne. . . . He squatted on his heels, the barrel across his knees, facing the Italian, whose bag lay between them for evidence. While the grass tickled his feet, his palms were moist from apprehension. He chewed a grass blade for comfort, gazing into those marble eyes, bewildered at that flickering smile, noting the soiled clothes and broken fingernails.

"Boy?" the Italian began. "You b'long to him? You live here, hah?"

Danny schooled himself in silence. Words were tricks: the flattering speaker at the funeral had not once met his father and mother. Words were false: Ted, buying him ice-cream after the burial, promised kindness and love. Words lacked strength: Ruth, his real aunt, smiled with endless patience from a neutral corner. . . . Danny shifted the gun, slid backward to a dryer patch. Blue-jays bickered and added in the tunnel. A squirrel jabbered from the stone wall. Although the man had spoken English, Danny pretended deafness.

"Okay, boy. You watch, an' he get police for me. . . ."

"But, you stole!" Danny flared up. "You came and stole his ferns. This is his land. You can't do that!"

The man shrugged, sighed, fingered his mustache. When he sat erect and felt in his pockets, Danny readied the gun, but all that came from the coat was a pipe and tobacco.

"Sure! I take fern back on train, sell 'em in city—but not no more, hah? Now I go for jail."

The man frowned as he removed his hat and wiped sweat from matted hair streaked with grey. He jammed on the hat, filled his pipe, squinted at the ferns growing by the wall. His face was gentle as he lit the tobacco and puffed.

"Plenty fern here, but wha' happen in jail? Police not give money for fern. No, florin' give money—not much, but money. Plenty fern here, boy. He no miss tra."

"It's his place," Danny insisted. "He's got signs around, and he owns this fold. He's my uncle, see?"

The Italian inhaled this information. Sunlight touched his face, glinted on the silver watch he squeezed from a tight pocket near his belt. He consulted the dial, shut the case with a click, shook his head.

"Train come soon, boy. Train to city. You let me go home?"

Aping his uncle, Danny scowled and pursed his lips. The Italian smiled again, leaned on his elbow as if he and Danny were to share a picnic lunch.

"I got boy like you—t'ree boy an' two girl. They wait plenty long if Paps go for jail. What say?"

Danny faced toward the green tunnel, but eyed the man askance. Ted was bound to return after phoning the sheriff. The sun had passed its zenith, yet lunch was no temptation. Secure despite the plea, Danny rested the gun on the grass, stood up to stretch, cast a shadow of responsible dimensions.

"What you say?" the Italian repeated, pushing from the ground.

Words became stronger. Words reversed their positions, and, though bluejays screamed warnings, Danny felt himself imprisoned. The green tunnel had been a smaller prison. Sudden tears wet his bare chest and khaki shorts. For once, he sobbed without shame, for he remembered the crow, wing-shot by his uncle. Limping into the underbrush, the crow had thrashed among the leaves before he died. . . . The Italian stared at Danny, his lips working and his mustache quivering. His pardon needed no words. He stood erect and clapped his hands in gratitude.

"You good boy. Good, to let me go." But his soft guttural angered Danny, who stamped in the dust and raised a firm chin.

"All right, mister. Clear out, and fast! If my uncle catches you—"

This threat was effective. The Italian flashed a grin, wheeled around. For almost double, he padded through the field on bowed legs, paused at the breach in the wall to sweep off his hat, waved it, disappeared. He had abandoned the bag of ferns. When Danny came into the road, the footprints were muddled. An ominous quiet held, until the hillside path crashed and echoed. Danny made fists of his hands, dug them into his pockets. Ted was hastening on, anger behind him. No excuse would help, yet Danny awaited the reckoning, hummed off-key, put the green tunnel forever from him.