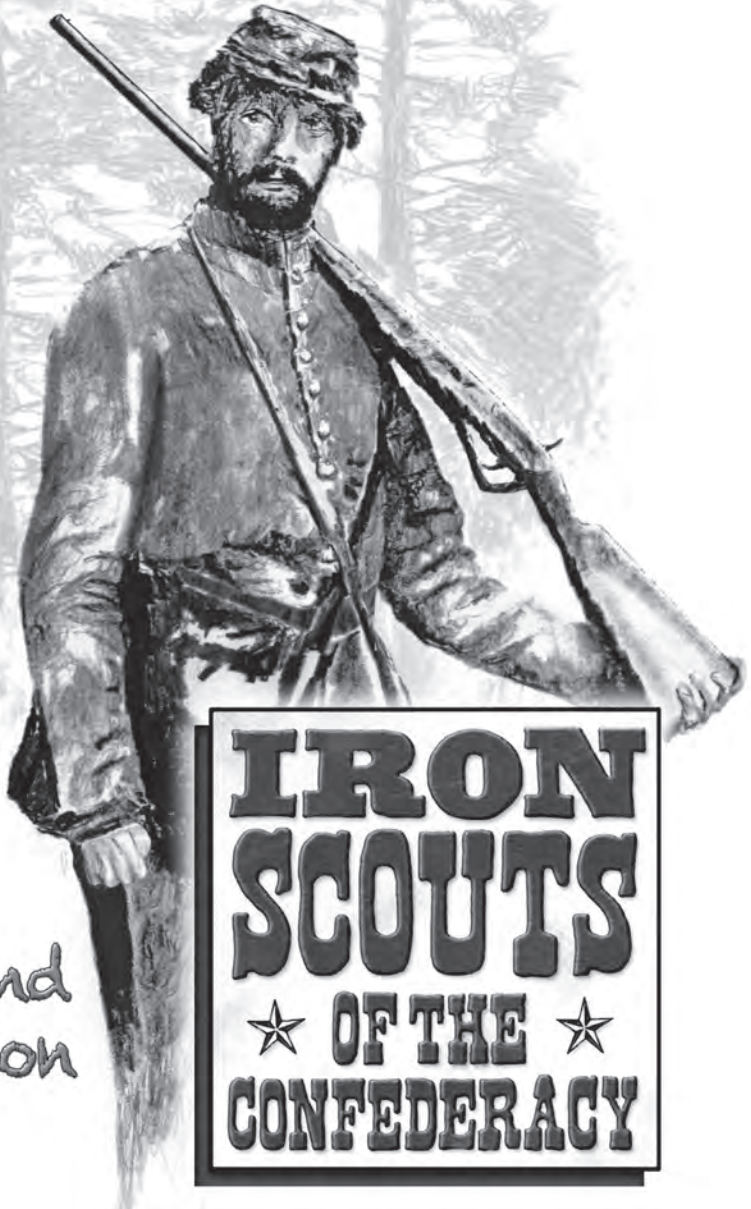


by
Lee McGiffin



Second
Edition

**IRON
SCOUTS
★ OF THE ★
CONFEDERACY**

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Foreword

During the last few decades, the American people have exhibited a renewed interest in studying the history of the War Between the States. This fact should come as no surprise, for this era had a profound effect upon the course of our nation's history and culture. Numerous books and videos have documented the dramatic changes that the Civil War sparked in our country on the political, religious, and social levels. However, few books have attempted to give readers an appreciation for the personal struggles that young people had to endure during this period of American history.

Iron Scouts of the Confederacy chronicles the true adventures of two teenage brothers who grew up during the War Between the States as orphans and as soldiers. These two young men were faced with the choice of fighting for their homeland against overwhelming odds or sitting out their teen years as poor and humble farmers. The decision that they make causes both of them to learn a great deal about themselves, the faithfulness of God, and the horrible price that the sons of the South had to pay to support their belief in states' rights.

In modern American society, where freedom is so often taken for granted and honor is very seldom seen as a virtue, this story reminds us that honor is not always won on the field of battle but in the daily struggle to do our God-given duty. Each reader will be challenged, therefore, as he rides along with these young soldiers, to appreciate the courage and valor that was manifested by such simple country boys.

Iron Scouts of the Confederacy is a book dedicated to the task of educating Americans about the personal trials and challenges that faced young people in the United States during the bloody Civil War. It is a story that should stir the heart of every American—North or South.

Michael J. McHugh
Arlington Heights, Illinois

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The Confederate States

Chapter One

Ben Meets Shelby Harris

The short, stocky boy stood motionless, sighting down his long rifle at the squirrel skittering through the branches of the big oak tree. Gently now, squeeze the trigger, and there will be Brunswick stew for supper.

But before he could fire, the sound of a horse crashing through the quiet woods above the Tombigbee River sent the squirrel into hiding.

Ben Fane lowered his rifle in disgust. It was probably one of the high and mighty Partlows whose hundreds of black acres joined the Fane farm a half mile away.

He wished his older brother, Gant, were here. Gant always said what he thought, even to a Partlow. But when you are only fourteen you don't talk uppity to your elders. His father had drummed that into his head long before he left to fight the Yankees in Virginia.

He stepped back into the tangle of undergrowth, his faded jeans and hickory shirt dull against the flaming red-bud and white dogwood. Hungry as he was, he found it hard to be angry with anyone now that spring had come to the cotton country of Alabama. Maybe he'd say howdy to his supper snatcher and ask for war news. The Partlows at Blossom Hill always had a newspaper from Montgomery.

Ben pushed back his sandy hair and took the scowl off his face, but no Partlow appeared. Into the clearing rode a stranger, tall in the saddle, his hands easy on the reins, his face sun-creased below the wide, black hat.

“Sorry I spoiled your shot.”



Ben's sturdy shoulders relaxed, and his freckled face broke into a welcome smile. The man hadn't called him "son," or "boy," or "shorty." He stepped out of the brush and showed his manners. "I'm Ben Fane, sir. Might have missed the squirrel, anyway. My brother, Gant, and I live down the road. Won't you stop by?"

The man extended his hand. “Shelby Harris from Texas. I could use some cold spring water. Road is hot for April. Light up behind me and let’s travel.”

Ben climbed onto the sorrel behind the ornate western saddle and was thankful Mr. Harris wanted only spring water. Except for meal and bacon there wasn’t much to eat unless Gant showed up with some catfish. It wasn’t that they were dirt poor. Gant just kept putting off going to town for supplies. He seemed worried about something, almost like he was hiding.

“You two live alone?” the stranger asked.

“Yes, sir, just me and Gant. My mother died when I was three. My father was killed at Manassas.”

“Sorry, Ben.”

They rode on, with Ben wishing he knew where the man was going. But you never asked a stranger his business. He glanced down at the rider’s scuffed but handsome boots. He saw the sweat-stained hat, the rifle in the gun boot, the six-shooters in their holsters, and the trim, tight bedroll.

He couldn’t be going to war, not dressed in homespun shirt and shabby brown pants. Confederate soldiers wore handsome gray uniforms with yellow cavalry facings, shining sabers, and plumes in their hats. Bands played, girls threw flowers, and women served their finest cakes.

Ben knew that was true. Just a year ago, after the Yankees fired on Fort Sumter, Colonel Robert Partlow had rallied the men from the county. Ben could still remember the speeches and the cheering and the wondrous food spread on long tables beneath the magnolia trees at Blossom Hill.

That’s when his father had enlisted. John Fane had signed his name, packed up his gun and his Bible, and told Gant he must take care of Ben and the farm.

“You asleep, Ben?”

Ben quit daydreaming and told Mr. Harris to turn up the lane, and in no time at all they were sitting in the shade of the hackberry tree, drinking cold water and watching the breeze ruffle the ears of the foxhound, Bawlie, asleep on the narrow gallery of the old, whitewashed house.

“Guess I did you out of your supper, Ben. That was a pretty long shot, though. I saw the squirrel.”

“I learned to shoot early. I don’t often miss.” Ben hoped he didn’t sound braggish.

“Looks like you got a good eye. Take a try at the knot-hole in that tree.” The big-boned Texan pointed at a mark a hundred feet away.

Ben picked up his gun, took quick aim, and fired. The bullet shattered the dead center of the mark.

The stranger shook his head. “I learned to shoot early, too, but I wasn’t that good when I was only ten or eleven.”

The pride went out of Ben. There it was again—his height. His father had been six feet. His brother was even taller, but Ben didn’t have the Fane height. His strong arms and heavy shoulders could do a man’s work, but he was short, and it didn’t seem he would ever grow any more.

He looked at his guest with more sorrow than anger. “I’m fourteen years old, sir. It’s just that I’m short for my age.”

“Nothing to get grveled about, Ben. Height is sometimes a burden. Sleep with your feet out of bed; bump your head on doorways. In a war, a man tall in the saddle is a prime target. Anyone who can shoot like you can don’t need to be six feet tall.”

Something about the quiet confidence of the stranger made Ben forget the taunts of other boys at school, the worry of his father, and the concern of his brother, Gant, as to his size.

He didn't tell Mr. Harris he had a special tree in the woods where he made notches with his knife and stretched and stretched, trying to be even a half inch taller. The Fanes didn't tell their troubles to the first stranger who came along.

Ben wished Mr. Harris would stay on, though, for he and Gant didn't have many visitors. But you don't ask a man to stay to supper and bed down if there is nothing to eat but meal and bacon and long sweetening.

"Sun is getting low, sir. If you want to spend the night, you can go to Blossom Hill—that's the Partlow plantation. They'd be pleased to have you."

"I'm not fancy folks, Ben. If you'd let me sleep on the gallery here, I'd be a sight happier."

"Oh, we have plenty of room. Like to have you stay, but I thought ..."

"Ben, you and I were raised the same way. Go out and shoot or catch your supper! I bet I know what you got in the kitchen safe—meal and bacon and sweetenin'! But you put all that with the rabbit here in my tow sack, and sure as God made black-eyed peas, we are going to have ourselves a meal. Suit you?"

"Sure does. Gant and I got a lot of cotton to chop and row crops to tend. Mostly we just shoot or fish and make out best we can."

Shelby took the rabbit out of his sack and started dressing it with his bowie knife. "Reckon your brother will get home before we get his supper ready?"

“He’ll be along. You’ll like Gant. He’s a better shot than I am. Why he even beat out Tracy Partlow from Blossom Hill at the turkey shoot a few years back! Tracy took it mighty hard. The Partlows just can’t get used to being bested in anything.”

Harris wiped his knife on the grass. “Bet Gant’s good at tracking and reading sign, too.”

“Best in the county. You should see him work old Bawlie in a fox hunt.”

“Guess it would take a lot to lose him in a strange piece of woods, wouldn’t it?”

Ben drew more water from the well. “I don’t guess Gant could get lost anywhere. He can walk by the stars or the sun and ride by the feel of the ground. He can travel by the way the wind blows and the smell of the trees and fields.”

Ben suddenly realized he was doing all of the talking and took the rabbit to the kitchen where he stirred up the wood coals in the stove.

He knew he shouldn’t brag about Gant like that, but as long as he could remember Ben had been his older brother’s shadow. Gant it was who had taught him the secrets of the woods and the river; Gant who had taught him to ride and shoot; Gant who made him go to school and helped him with his ciphering.

Ben knew he loved his father, too, in a different way. Stern, grief-ridden John Fane never unbent toward his sons. He brought them up as best he could without a woman. He taught them to love God and respect the land. He taught them their manners and the way to plant and harvest.

Then he had gone away to war, not because he owned any slaves, but because he felt it was his bounden duty. It concerned his land and his sons.

As Ben heard the lard sputter in the frying pan, he sorrowed again at the death of his father. John Fane had loved his small farm even more than the Partlows cared for their vast domain. It was only a few hundred acres in the midst of big plantations, but John Fane always refused to sell. The land was his, inherited from his mother, whose father had been an aristocrat of a French colony in the Alabama black lands in 1818. But John Fane's grandfather had known little of farming. Gradually, the family acres had dwindled. Now Ben and Gant owned what was left.

Ben had heard the story many times. He guessed that was why his father had never asked or accepted help from his wealthy neighbors. John Fane had taught his sons to bow to no man in either fear or envy.

Ben had the rabbit fried and the corn pone in the oven before he heard Gant trotting down the lane. He stood in the doorway watching his brother, admiring the tall, rangy man who sat so easily in the saddle, yet seemed almost awkward on foot. Gant's dark hair needed cutting under one of his father's old hats. The brown eyes above the high cheekbones would be troubled. They always were of late. But Gant could ride; Lordy, how he could ride! Ben guessed the Texan couldn't help but see that.

Gant's face was wary of the stranger until Ben stood at his stirrup and told him about Shelby Harris. Then he slipped from his horse and made the visitor welcome.

"Glad you dropped by. Except for the circuit rider and the tin peddler we don't see many strangers. Heard any war news?"

"Not much, except that the Army of Northern Virginia needs scouts. Word got to Texas. I left the Rangers and headed east, trying to find men along the way to join up. Never saw anyone who can shoot like your brother here. I

did him out of a squirrel for dinner, so I threw my rabbit into the pot. Ben asked me to bed down for the night.”

The trouble seemed to go out of Gant’s face. “Glad to have you, Harris. Little short on supplies. Don’t get to town as often as I should.”

He turned to Ben. “How about it? Do we have fried or burned rabbit?”

Ben, relieved to see Gant laugh again, ran to the kitchen and dished up the rabbit and corn pone. Watching his guest in the half dark, Ben saw Shelby Harris’s eyes squinched as though he could still see halfway across Texas. The man talked of mule trains and mustanging. Gant asked him about cotton, the prices and the market.

Before he knew it, someone was shaking Ben’s arm and telling him it was time everyone turned in. Ben groped his way to the bedroom, kicked off his shoes, and left his clothes on the floor. Burrowing into the big bed, he could still hear voices in the next room.

“Gant, the South needs you. George Shadburne is a Texan I’ve known all my life. He’s chief of scouts for the cavalry. Wade Hampton wants more men like him.”

“Don’t you think I’ve wanted to go for a whole year? I’m about the only able-bodied man of twenty left in the county! I hate going into town. People whisper and stare like I was a coward. But there’s Ben. We’ve no kinfolks. I promised to take care of him.”

“Ben is older and wiser than you know, Gant.”

“If you think he can stand it ...”

“Of course, he can. Leave it to me.”

The voices sank lower, and Ben didn’t hear the rest. Of course, Gant had hated staying home. Now the Texan had

come along and made him realize Ben Fane was grown up. They would all go to war together, as scouts for Wade Hampton.

Half asleep, Ben saw himself riding down the glory road in a splendid uniform, his saber flashing, his gauntlets white, and the plume on his hat stirring in the breeze. He caught the roll of drums and could hear the bugles blow.



At breakfast, Ben waited breathlessly for the news, but nothing was said of the war. Gant and Shelby Harris rode off, saying they would be back by noon.

There was nothing left for Ben to do but go to the cotton field. It seemed just like any other day, but this time he didn't mind, for very soon he'd be off to that far place called Virginia.

Shelby Harris didn't think he'd find anyone for the scouts at Blossom Hill. Tracy Partlow, who was just Gant's age, had gone with his father when the local company was mustered. He'd gone with a body servant and a trunk and a fine uniform, riding light and handsome on his thoroughbred, dancing down the lane like he owned the world.

Ben chopped harder at the weeds, thinking of Tracy Partlow and his lordly ways. He remembered the time Gant had caught young Tracy shooting squirrels just to show his marksmanship. Gant had explained to him that you didn't shoot animals just to be shooting, at least not on Fane land.

Tracy had ignored the warning. So Gant had thrashed him and sent him home with a bloody nose. And there had been the time when Tracy had borrowed a horse from John Fane and ridden it to death. There had been another fight between Tracy and Gant.

After that, Mr. Partlow came to apologize, pay for the horse, and offer the use of two slaves to help pick cotton. John Fane had refused the offer. The Fanes had picked their own cotton.

No, Shelby Harris would find no scouts at Blossom Hill. There was only Carrie left, and there wasn't much a blue-eyed girl of seventeen could do about a war except write to the soldiers and go to rallies.

Ben liked Carrie. She wasn't uppity like Tracy. She had even used his old cane fishing pole once and let him bait her hook. Not that he ever told Gant about it, for Gant got stormy looking when anyone mentioned Carrie Partlow.



At noon, Ben whistled to Bawlie snoozing under a sweet gum tree and headed for the house. His bare feet made no sound in the grass as he passed the kitchen window. He could hear Gant and Shelby at it again.

“Take the chip off your shoulder, Gant. Of course, they want him!”

“I don't like to be beholden to anyone, most of all the ...”

“In a war it doesn't matter. It's the end result that counts.”

Ben grinned. It was just like Gant to take it hard when he had to lie about his brother's age to get him into the army. He set up a whistle so they wouldn't think he was eavesdropping.

The talk at dinner was of crops and what wagons were seen in town, how coffee had gone up in price and white flour was hard to get.

Shelby reached for his hat. “Think I'll trot that sorrel around. He gets restless. Like to see you ride, Ben.”

Ben was sure he understood now. Of course, the Texan wanted to see how well he rode. For a scout that was pretty important. He would show Shelby Harris!

Show him Ben did, thundering around the south pasture on his black mare, jumping ditches, galloping, trotting. Gant displayed even more skill, but it was Shelby Harris who gave them an exhibition of how the Comanches rode, clinging easily to one side of the horse, presenting no target for arrow or bullet.

Ben watched in awe. "Let me try it!"

Shelby showed him how, and within an hour Ben could disappear from sight and swing back into the saddle. Shelby was warm in his praise. "That trick is a lot easier for you. A short man has the edge on a tall piece like me."

Gant smiled quietly. "He has the jump on me, too, when it comes to disappearing in a tree."

Shelby was interested. "Let's see you do it, Ben."

Ben kicked off his shoes and leaped for a low limb on a towering oak. In seconds he had disappeared, weaving his way in and out of the branches with the agility of a panther. He had learned to climb when he threshed pecan trees at the age of six. Now he could go up a tree with little movement of branches and even less noise.

"Hallo down there!" he called from the treetop.

The Texan craned his neck to see as Ben dropped some twigs on him and slid to the ground. "You'd be a good man to have around if I wanted to get my bearings! I'm too tall to run up a tree."

Ben saw the pride in Gant's eyes and felt a warm glow that lasted long after they had turned the horses out to pas-

ture. He was sure, now, that Shelby Harris thought he would be a good scout.

But a vague uneasiness came to him as they sat on the gallery. Gant and Harris looked at each other, and both started to talk at once, and then were silent.

Finally, Gant Fane put it into words. "We're going to the war, Ben."

"When do we leave?"

Harris started to speak, but Gant shook his head, his face set, his eyes bleak. "You're not going, Ben. You're only fourteen. I'm going with Shelby because I'm needed as a scout."

A strange numbness settled over Ben. "But, Gant, I can ride and shoot and ..."

"No, Ben, they won't take anyone under sixteen. You're going to live with the Partlows until I get back. I don't like it. You probably won't like it, either. But that's the way it has to be. This is war."

Chapter Two

Staying with the Partlows

For Ben Fane, the world seemed to fall apart. He didn't want to keep his brother from the war, but he didn't want to stay with the Partlows.

“If I were tall for my age instead of short, I could go with you.”



Gant was patient as he boarded up the windows of the house. “No, Ben, that has nothing to do with it. The scouts aren't regular army. They take bigger risks, get into tighter places.”

Shelby nailed another board into place. “Scouts have to operate on their own, often behind enemy lines. Sometimes they come back. Sometimes they don't. They wear Union coats and often pass for Yankees. Unless they are wearing some bit of gray clothing, they can be shot as spies. Now do you understand?”

Ben scratched Bawlie's head as the hound cried in front of the barred front door. "Could I come and join you in a year?"

Gant, with nails in his mouth, nodded agreement.

"If it is just for a year, why can't I stay here then? I can cook and tend the crops. I don't want to go to the Partlows'. They don't want me."

"No, I can't leave you here alone. A scout can't have his mind divided, worrying about someone at home. Besides, Mrs. Partlow's folks came from South Carolina near the Hampton plantation. When she found out General Wade Hampton needed me, she threw back her head like she was leading a parade and said it would be her pleasure to have you as a guest."

Knowing Mrs. Partlow's manner of head tossing, Ben couldn't help but laugh, and after that things didn't hurt so much.

When Gant went to round up the stock, Shelby hunkered down in the dust and drew a map, showing the way to Virginia.

As soon as the Texan went after the horses, Ben copied the map on a piece of brown paper and hid it inside his shirt. Then he packed what few treasures he owned in his father's old carpetbag and went out the back door where Bawlie waited, his ears down, his tail stilled.

He whistled to the hound and forked his horse. "Bawlie is coming with me."

Gant shook his head. "They have all those blue-blooded dogs at Blossom Hill. I'd better drop him off with some family as I go east."

Ben's dark eyes snapped. "If the Partlows take me, they've got to take Bawlie."

"He's right," Shelby said. "If Mrs. Partlow wants to be so all-fired helpful to Wade Hampton, she can take Bawlie and love him like a brother!"

The idea of Mrs. Robert Partlow's patrician white face being licked lovingly by a mongrel hound was too much for Ben. He burst out laughing as he rode down the lane, holding his rifle and carpetbag in front of him.



In the late afternoon, the three trotted up the tree-arched drive to Blossom Hill, and once again Ben knew the tight feeling of despair. It wasn't like the day he had returned Carrie's bonnet or like the day of the muster when there had been laughter and singing and bragging at the big house.

Now the fluted pillars loomed large, and the wide steps were empty and silent. Gladly would Ben have turned his mare, Winsome, and galloped down the drive, but Shelby Harris saw the scowl on his face.

"I don't cotton to the proud rich, either, Ben, but we've got a war to fight. Gant and I will be riding and fighting alongside some folks we won't like too well, either."

Ben set his jaw and slipped from his horse, clutching his carpetbag and rifle. He tried to walk as carelessly as Shelby, who showed no awe of Blossom Hill, but he couldn't smile when Bawlie bounded up the steps, mortally sure of a king's welcome.

He didn't even see the silver-haired butler who opened the door. He only knew that someone took his gear and that Bawlie had disappeared. "My dog's gone, I ..."

The butler told him the dog was in the kitchen. “Even Miss Carrie don’t let the dogs in the house.”

Then Ben found himself sitting awkwardly on a sofa in the parlor with Carrie and Mrs. Partlow, who assured Gant she would take very good care of Ben. She commended him for joining the scouts and gave Shelby a long message for her friend, Wade Hampton.

He heard Gant saying, “Yes, ma’am; thank you, ma’am,” and Shelby saying they couldn’t stay to supper. And finally there were polite good-byes, and it seemed to Ben that Carrie put her hand on Gant’s arm a mighty long time and Gant not caring at all.

They stood on the gallery, and Ben shook hands with Shelby and he shook hands with Gant, frozen and miserable—his throat hurting like he had a catfish bone in his gullet.

He watched his brother and the Texan until they were out of sight; and when he finally turned around, there was no one there but Plato, the butler, who had about the kindest face Ben had ever seen.

“I’ll take you to your room, Mr. Ben. Bawlie, he’s on the back stoop full of chicken bones and dreamin’ of rabbits.”

His room was just about the biggest place Ben had ever seen, with a soft rug and crisp towels on the washstand and the most lonesome looking bed in the world.

Ben never knew how he got through that first meal at the big house with all the fine china, silver, and candlelight. Hungry as he was, he couldn’t enjoy the ham and sweet potatoes and beaten biscuits.

Mrs. Partlow tried to talk to him and so did Carrie, but he had never been around womenfolk much and his tongue seemed larger than his hands.

After supper, he pretended to read a book while Carrie played the piano; but when guests dropped in, he was glad to escape up the long stairway to his room, which seemed even larger in the night shadows.

He hung up his Sunday suit and crawled into the big bed between the fine linen sheets. He had never slept alone before. There had always been Gant and the comforting weight of Bawlie at his feet.

The loneliness grew in him until it seemed heavier than the shadows. Just when he was about to grab his clothes and run back to the boarded up house, he saw the door swing open and heard the soft voice of Plato. “Good night, Mr. Ben, God rest you well.”

He caught a low whimper, and a flying object with tan feet and a wet nose landed on his bed, licking his face with lavish affection.

Some of the loneliness went away and Ben slept, with Bawlie twitching and dreaming beside him.



The first few weeks at Blossom Hill went faster than Ben had expected. He explored the musty attic, the big library, the full smokehouse, and the dark wine cellar. He visited the kennels and the stables. He watched the field hands bring in the mules at night.

Then came the news of Shiloh and the long casualty lists. A Partlow cousin had been killed.

Ben tried to express his sympathy. “I’m sorry for your trouble, ma’am.”

But Mrs. Partlow was more distant than ever. “Thank you, boy. Run and play now.”

Ben walked down the drive, kicking at stones, knowing he didn't belong and wasn't really wanted at Blossom Hill.

As the weeks dragged on, time passed more slowly. There was no cotton to chop. The field hands made the crop on the Fane land now. There was no need for hunting or fishing. The Partlow table was well laden without squirrel, rabbit, or catfish.

He wandered down to the river and took off his shoes. It was the only place he dared go barefoot these days. He was so full of his own troubles he didn't even hear Carrie Partlow coming up the river path. "You don't like it at Blossom Hill, do you, Ben?"

"Yes, Miss Carrie, it's fine except there's no work for me to do."

Carrie sat down and took off her bonnet. "You miss Gant just like I miss my father and Tracy."

"Maybe they'll be back before long."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. Father's letters say it won't be over in a few months or even a year. I expect your brother and Mr. Harris are in Virginia by now. Perhaps they'll see Tracy. He's in Richmond."

"Could be."

"Gant wouldn't want to see Tracy, would he?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Carrie, Gant and Tracy never did hit it off too well."

"Can't you just call me Carrie? I'm lonely too, Ben. It would be nice to have a younger brother like you."

Ben skipped a stone in the water. "Yes, ma'am. I mean ..."
Just then, Bawlie loped up from the riverbank and embraced

Carrie with two wet and dirty paws, spraying them both with mud from his wagging tail.

Carrie laughed and put her bonnet on Bawlie's ears. Somehow it was easier for Ben to talk after that. He told her how he missed Gant and how he hated being left behind.

Carrie told him about Tracy and the fear she carried for him. "Tracy isn't bad, Ben. He just doesn't see things the way you and Gant do. Mother spoiled him. Gave him everything he wanted. He was always right; everyone else was wrong. Father found that out too late. Even caning him didn't help then."

Ben found himself comforting Carrie Partlow as he would the sister he had never had. "Tracy can ride and shoot 'most as well as Gant. He'll make a good soldier."

Slow tears started in Carrie's eyes. "To you and Gant I know Tracy seems rude and proud, but inside he isn't like that. He's afraid of himself. He's afraid of not being reckless and brave like all the Partlows."

"He's not a very good loser, Carrie."

"I know. He tries to cover his fears by talking big and acting mean. I've never told anyone but you." She turned to Ben with tear-streaked face. "What will he do if a battle goes against him?"

Ben Fane realized someone did need him. He handed Carrie his clean bandanna to wipe her eyes. "My father always said when a war comes a man does what he has to do. Tracy will make out, Carrie."

After that, Carrie and Ben often met at the river, sharing their letters from Gant and Tracy and even Shelby Harris.

Tracy's letters were mostly about the balls and parties in Richmond, the pretty girls and his new uniforms. It was

clear to Ben that Tracy had never seen a bluecoat or fired a shot.

Gant's letters told about the scouts gathered from all over the South. They were called the "Iron Scouts" by the Yankees because they did such impossible things.

Sometimes, Carrie asked to have Gant's letters read a second time; and Ben obliged, watching the color rise in her checks, seeing her eyes brighten.

But even with Carrie for a friend, the weeks seemed endless. Cousins came visiting from the Military Academy at Tuscaloosa, splendid in uniform, towering over Ben, treating him with mannerly courtesy as one much younger and less experienced.

That was the last straw for Ben Fane. He knew now he was going to join Gant in Virginia. A year was too long to wait. Carefully he made his plans. He knew he must run away, for Mrs. Partlow would never consent to his leaving. She had given her word to Gant Fane, and she would keep it at all costs.



Ben consulted his father's almanac and picked a clear night, the last day of May. He took a ride and did not return Winsome to the stable, but instead he staked the mare out near the end of the drive.

He went to the back stoop and played with Bawlie for what he knew was the last time. He sat in the warm sunshine, his face buried in the dog's black coat, until Plato stopped polishing silver and called from the window, "You act like you not gonna see that hound for a year to come!"

At supper, he ate as much as he could, but it seemed as if the chicken pie choked him. Wouldn't you know they'd

have something he couldn't wrap up and put in his pocket! Even the dessert was a soft pudding instead of cake.

Pleading sleepiness, he escaped to his room and waited impatiently for the big house to grow quiet. Carefully he put his belongings in his poncho—the brown paper map showing the route to Virginia, his almanac, a faded picture of his mother, his knife, and a small Bible. Around his neck, he hung the chain with its deerskin moneybag. He still had the \$25 Gant had left him. That should get him to Virginia. Then he wrote a note to Mrs. Partlow and put it on his pillow.

He crouched by the window waiting for the clock to strike in the big hall. He saw the lights wink out in the slave quarters. He heard Plato lock the front door. The footsteps died away.

He picked up his bedroll, wishing he dared take the quilt from his bed. But what was not his, he could not borrow. Tucking the rifle under his arm, he crept along the dark hallway and padded down the stairs.

He felt his way through the parlor and swung wide the French door onto the gallery. Keeping to the shadows, he ran down the steps and didn't stop until he was half the length of the drive. Breathing hard, he sat down to put on his shoes.

“Mr. Ben!” The hoarse whisper scared Ben into next Tuesday. He tried to get to his feet, but a black shadow blocked his way.

“It's only Plato, Mr. Ben. I don't aim to stop you. But a man bound for Virginia needs some food. Here's enough to last you most a week, if you eat careful, and a tin cup and fry pan.”

Ben took the bulky parcel. “Thanks, Plato.”

“And if you get any word of Mr. Robert or Mr. Tracy in the war.... Well, Miss Carrie, she hasn’t had any letters for a long time.”

“I’ll send word, Plato. Take care of Blossom Hill.”

“The good Lord keep you safe, Mr. Ben.” Plato was gone as silently as he had come, leaving Ben to go after Winsome in the nearby hedgerow.

He started to whistle softly as he untied the black mare and threw his bedroll behind the saddle. He tightened the cinch and felt a wet tongue on his hand. “Bawlie! I can’t take you with me. Go back to the house now, go on!”

But Bawlie didn’t want to go home. He was ready for a frolic. In desperation Ben untied Winsome and led her to the lane. “All right, Bawlie, if you won’t go home, come along. I’ll tie you up at a farmhouse along the way, and you can find your own way back!”

“I’ll take him back with me, Ben.”

He knew he was caught for certain now, for there in the moonlight stood Carrie Partlow. Hastily he mounted Winsome and started to put heel to flank. No girl was going to stop him!

But Carrie caught the mare’s bridle. “Don’t be cross with me, Ben. I’m not going to stop you. I knew you meant to leave when Plato told me your horse was saddled near the lane. I don’t blame you. I just wanted to say good-bye and give you this.”

She picked up a soft brown blanket and laid it across his bedroll. Ben could just make out the embroidered initials on it, T.P. “That belongs to Tracy. He won’t like me to have it.”

“Of course, he won’t mind. You’re all fighting in the same war. If you can, send word of Tracy and my father and Gant.”

Ben couldn’t talk over the lump in his throat. He nodded his head and lifted his hand in salute as Winsome headed down the lane.

No drums rolled, no bugles blew, and no flags were flying as Ben Fane turned onto the long, lonely road that led to the distant battlefields of Virginia.