

Chapter Nine

Spring. It seeped unseen into the waiting red earth in early March, softening the hard ground for the coming plow and awakening life that had lain gently sleeping through the cold winter. But by the end of March it was evident everywhere: in the barn where three new calves bellowed and chicks the color of soft pale sunlight chirped; in the yard where the wisteria and English dogwood bushes readied themselves for their annual Easter bloom, and the fig tree budded producing the forerunners of juicy, brown fruit for which the boys and I would have to do battle with fig-loving Jack; and in the smell of the earth itself. Rain-drenched, fresh, vital, full of life, spring enveloped all of us.

I was eager to be in the fields again, to feel the furrowed rows of damp, soft earth beneath my feet; eager to walk barefooted through the cool forest, hug the trees, and sit under their protective shadow. But although every living thing knew it was spring, Miss Crocker and the other teachers evidently did not, for school lingered on indefinitely. In the last week of March when Papa and Mr. Morrison began to plow the east field, I volunteered to sacrifice school and help them. My offer was refused and I trudged wearily to school for another week.

“I guess I won’t be seein’ much of y’all after next Friday,” said Jeremy one evening as we neared his forest trail.

“Guess not,” said Stacey.

“Be nice if our schools ended at the same time.”

“You crazy!” I cried, remembering that Jefferson Davis didn’t dismiss until mid-May.

Jeremy stammered an apology. “I—I just meant we could still see each other.” He was silent a moment, then brightened. “Maybe I can come over to see y’all sometime.”

Stacey shook his head. “Don’t think Papa would like that.”

“Well . . . I just thought . . .” He shrugged. “It’ll sure be lonely without y’all.”

“Lonely?” I asked. “With all them brothers and sisters you got?”

Jeremy frowned. “The little ones, they too young to play

◀ *What keeps Cassie from enjoying the spring?*

◀ *What suggestion does Jeremy make that Stacey says Papa wouldn’t like?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

seep (sēp) *vi.*, ooze

trudge (truj) *vi.*, walk laboriously

stam • mer (stam’ər) *vi.*, stutter, halt in speaking

► *Why is Lillian Jean tolerable? How do R.W. and Melvin treat T.J.?*

► *What does R.W. and Melvin do when T.J. is around? What do they do when he is not there?*

with, and the older ones . . . Lillian Jean and R.W. and Melvin, I guess I don't like them very much."

"What you saying?" asked Stacey. "You can't not like your own sister and brothers."

"Well, I can understand that," I said soberly. "I sure don't like them."

"But they're his kin. A fellow's gotta like his own kin."

Jeremy thought about that. "Well, Lillian Jean's all right, I guess. She ain't so persnickety since Cassie stopped bein' her friend." He smiled a secret smile to himself. "But that R.W. and Melvin, they ain't very nice. You oughta see how they treat T.J. . . ." He halted, looked up embarrassed, and was quiet.

Stacey stopped. "How they treat him?"

Jeremy stopped too. "I don't know," he said as if he was sorry he had mentioned it. "They just don't do him right."

"How?" asked Stacey.

"Thought you didn't like him no more."

"Well . . . I don't," replied Stacey defensively. "But I heard he was running 'round with R.W. and Melvin. I wondered why. Them brothers of yours must be eighteen or nineteen."

Jeremy looked up at the sun, squinted, then glanced up his forest trail a few feet ahead. "They brung T.J. by the house a couple of times when Pa wasn't home. They treated him almost friendly like, but when he left they laughed and talked 'bout him—called him names." He squinted again at the trail and said hurriedly, "I better go. . . . See y'all tomorrow."

"Mama, how come you suppose R.W. and Melvin putting in time with T.J.?" I asked as I measured out two heaping tablespoons of flour for the cornbread.

Mama frowned down into the flour barrel. "Only one tablespoon, Cassie, and not so heaping."

"But, Mama, we always use two."

"That barrel will have to last us until Papa goes back to the railroad. Now put it back."

As I returned one tablespoon of flour to the barrel, I again asked, "What you think, Mama? How come them Simmses running 'round with T.J.?"

Mama measured out the baking powder and gave it to me. It was a teaspoon less than we had been using, but I didn't ask her about it. It was running low too.

Words
For
Everyday
Use

so • ber • ly (sō'bər lē) *adv.*, seriously
per • snick • e • ty (pər snik'ə tē) *adj.*, snobbish

"I don't really know, Cassie," she said, turning to the stove to stir milk into the butter beans. "They may just want him around because it makes them feel good."

"When T.J.'s around me, he don't make me feel good."

"Well, you told me Jeremy said they were laughing at T.J. behind his back. Some folks just like to keep other folks around to laugh at them . . . use them."

"I wonder how come T.J. don't know they laughing at him? You s'pose he's that dumb?"

"T.J.'s not 'dumb,' Cassie. He just wants attention, but he's going after it the wrong way."

I was going to ask what use T.J. could possibly be to anyone, but I was interrupted by Little Man running into the kitchen. "Mama!" he cried. "Mr. Jamison just drove up!" He had been in the barn cleaning the chicken coop with Christopher-John and stubby particles of straw still clung to his head. I grinned at his mussed appearance but didn't have time to tease him before he was gone again.

Mama looked at Big Ma, a question in her eyes, then followed Little Man outside. I decided that the cornbread could wait and dashed after them.

"Girl, get back in here and finish mixin' this cornbread!" ordered Big Ma.

"Yes'm," I said. "I'll be right back." Before Big Ma could reach me, I was out the back door running across the yard to the drive.

Mr. Jamison touched his hat as Mama approached. "How you doing, Miz Logan?" he asked.

"Just fine, Mr. Jamison," Mama answered. "And yourself?"

"Fine. Fine," he said absently. "Is David here?"

"He's over in the east field." Mama studied Mr. Jamison. "Anything wrong?"

"Oh, no . . . no. Just wanted to speak to him."

"Little Man," Mama said, turning, "go get Papa."

"Oh, no—don't do that. I'll just walk on over there if that's all right. I need the exercise." Mama nodded, and after he had spoken to me Mr. Jamison crossed the yard to the field. Little Man and I started to follow after him but Mama called us back and returned us to our jobs.

Mr. Jamison did not stay long. A few minutes later he emerged from the field alone, got into his car, and left.

◀ *Why does Mama say the Simms might be spending time with T.J.?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

muss • ed (must) *adj.*, untidy, disheveled

ab • sent • ly (ab'sənt lē) *adv.*, in a preoccupied manner

When supper was ready, I eagerly grabbed the iron bell before Christopher-John or Little Man could claim it, and ran onto the back porch to summon Papa, Mr. Morrison, and Stacey from the fields. As the three of them washed up on the back porch, Mama went to the end of the porch where Papa stood alone. "What did Mr. Jamison want?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

Papa took the towel Mama handed him, but did not reply immediately. I was just inside the kitchen dipping out the butter beans. I moved closer to the window so that I could hear his answer.

"Don't keep anything from me, David. If there's trouble, I want to know."

Papa looked down at her. "Nothing to worry 'bout, honey . . . just seems that Thurston Wallace been in town talking 'bout how he's not gonna let a few smart colored folks ruin his business. Says he's gonna put a stop to this shopping in Vicksburg. That's all."

Mama sighed and stared out across the plowed field to the sloping pasture land. "I'm feeling scared, David," she said.

Papa put down the towel. "Not yet, Mary. It's not time to be scared yet. They're just talking."

Mama turned and faced him. "And when they stop talking?"

"Then . . . then maybe it'll be time. But right now, pretty lady," he said, leading her by the hand toward the kitchen door, "right now I've got better things to think about."

Quickly I poured the rest of the butter beans into the bowl and hurried across the kitchen to the table. As Mama and Papa entered, I slid onto the bench beside Little Man and Christopher-John. Papa beamed down at the table.

"Well, look-a-here!" he exclaimed. "Good ole butter beans and cornbread! You better come on, Mr. Morrison! You too, son!" he called. "These womenfolks done gone and fixed us a feast."

After school was out, spring drooped quickly toward summer; yet Papa had not left for the railroad. He seemed to be waiting for something, and I secretly hoped that whatever that something was, it would never come so that he would not leave. But one evening as he, Mama, Big Ma, Mr. Morrison, and Stacey sat on the front porch while Christopher-John, Little Man, and I dashed around the yard chasing fireflies, I overheard him say, "Sunday I'm gonna have to go. Don't want to though. I got this gut feeling it ain't over yet. It's too easy."

► *Why had Mr. Jamison come to visit?*

► *Why hasn't Papa left for the railroad yet?*

I released the firefly imprisoned in my hand and sat beside Papa and Stacey on the steps. “Papa, please,” I said, leaning against his leg, “don’t go this year.” Stacey looked out into the falling night, his face resigned, and said nothing.

Papa put out his large hand and caressed my face. “Got to, Cassie girl,” he said softly. “Baby, there’s bills to pay and ain’t no money coming in. Your mama’s got no job come fall and there’s the mortgage and next year’s taxes to think of.”

“But, Papa, we planted more cotton this year. Won’t that pay the taxes?”

Papa shook his head. “With Mr. Morrison here we was able to plant more, but that cotton is for living on; the railroad money is for the taxes and the mortgage.”

I looked back at Mama wanting her to speak, to persuade him to stay, but when I saw her face I knew that she would not. She had known he would leave, just as we all had known.

“Papa, just another week or two, couldn’t you—”

“I can’t, baby. May have lost my job already.”

“But Papa—”

“Cassie, that’s enough now,” Mama said from the deepening shadows.

I grew quiet and Papa put his arms around Stacey and me, his hands falling casually over our shoulders. From the edge of the lawn where Little Man and Christopher-John had ventured after lightning bugs, Little Man called, “Somebody’s coming!” A few minutes later Mr. Avery and Mr. Lanier emerged from the dusk and walked up the sloping lawn. Mama sent Stacey and me to get more chairs for the porch, then we settled back beside Papa still sitting on the steps, his back propped against a pillar facing the visitors.

“You goin’ up to the store tomorrow, David?” Mr. Avery asked after all the amenities had been said. Since the first trip in January, Mr. Morrison had made one other trip to Vicksburg, but Papa had not gone with him.

Papa motioned to Mr. Morrison. “Mr. Morrison and me going the day after tomorrow. Your wife brought down that list of things you need yesterday.”

Mr. Avery cleared his throat nervously. “It’s—it’s that list I come ’bout, David. . . . I don’t want them things no more.”

The porch grew silent.

◀ *Why must Papa go?*

◀ *Why are Mr. Avery and Mr. Lanier canceling their orders?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ven • ture (ven´chər) *vi.*, proceed in the face of danger
a • me • ni • ty (ə men´ə tē) *n.*, conventional word or gesture

When no one said anything, Mr. Avery glanced at Mr. Lanier, and Mr. Lanier shook his head and continued. "Mr. Granger making it hard on us, David. Said we gonna have to give him sixty percent of the cotton, 'stead of fifty . . . now that the cotton's planted and it's too late to plant more. . . . Don't s'pose though that it makes much difference. The way cotton sells these days, seems the more we plant, the less money we gets anyways—"

Mr. Avery's coughing interrupted him and he waited patiently until the coughing had stopped before he went on. "I'm gonna be hard put to pay that debt in Vicksburg, David, but I'm gonna. . . . I want you to know that."

Papa nodded, looking toward the road. "I suppose Montier and Harrison raised their percentages too," he said.

"Montier did," replied Mr. Avery, "but far as I know Mr. Harrison ain't. He's a decent man."

"That does it," Mama sighed wearily.

Papa kept looking out into the darkness. "Forty percent. I expect a man used to living on fifty could live on forty . . . if he wanted to hard enough."

Mr. Avery shook his head. "Times too hard."

"Times are hard for everybody," Papa said.

Mr. Avery cleared his throat. "I know. I—I feel real bad 'bout what T.J. done—"

"I wasn't talking 'bout that," said Papa flatly.

Mr. Avery nodded self-consciously, then leaned forward in his chair and looked out into the forest. "But—but that ain't all Mr. Granger said. Said, too, we don't give up this shoppin' in Vicksburg, we can jus' get off his land. Says he tired of us stirrin' up trouble 'gainst decent white folks. Then them Wallaces, they come by my place, Brother Lanier's, and everybody's on this thing that owes them money. Said we can't pay our debts, they gonna have the sheriff out to get us . . . put us on the chain gang¹ to work it off."

"Oh, good Lord!" exclaimed Big Ma.

Mr. Lanier nodded and added, "Gotta go up to that store by tomorrow to show good faith."

Mr. Avery's coughing started again and for a while there was only the coughing and the silence. But when the coughing ceased, Mr. Lanier said, "I pray to God there was a way we could stay in this thing, but we can't go on no chain gang, David."

Papa nodded. "Don't expect you to, Silas."

Mr. Avery laughed softly. "We sure had 'em goin' for a time though, didn't we?"

► *What does Mr. Avery think Papa means when he says, "Times are hard for everybody"?*

► *With what does Mr. Granger threaten Mr. Avery? With what do the Wallaces threaten him?*

1. **chain gang.** Group of convicts chained together and given outdoor labor

"Yes," agreed Papa quietly, "we sure did."

When the men had left, Stacey snapped, "They got no right pulling out! Just 'cause them Wallaces threaten them one time they go jumping all over themselves to get out like a bunch of scared jackrabbits—"

Papa stood suddenly and grabbed Stacey upward. "You, boy, don't you get so grown you go to talking 'bout more than you know. Them men, they doing what they've gotta do. You got any idea what a risk they took just to go shopping in Vicksburg in the first place? They go on that chain gang and their families got nothing. They'll get kicked off that plot of land they tend and there'll be no place for them to go. You understand that?"

"Y-yessir," said Stacey. Papa released him and stared moodily into the night. "You were born blessed, boy, with land of your own. If you hadn't been, you'd cry out for it while you try to survive . . . like Mr. Lanier and Mr. Avery. Maybe even do what they doing now. It's hard on a man to give up, but sometimes it seems there just ain't nothing else he can do."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Papa," Stacey muttered.

After a moment, Papa reached out and draped his arm over Stacey's shoulder.

"Papa," I said, standing to join them, "we giving up too?"

Papa looked down at me and brought me closer, then waved his hand toward the drive. "You see that fig tree over yonder, Cassie? Them other trees all around . . . that oak and walnut, they're a lot bigger and they take up more room and give so much shade they almost overshadow that little ole fig. But that fig tree's got roots that run deep, and it belongs in that yard as much as that oak and walnut. It keeps on blooming, bearing good fruit year after year, knowing all the time it'll never get as big as them other trees. Just keeps on growing and doing what it gotta do. It don't give up. It give up, it'll die. There's a lesson to be learned from that little tree, Cassie girl, 'cause we're like it. We keep doing what we gotta, and we don't give up. We can't."

After Mr. Morrison had retired to his own house and Big Ma, the boys, and I had gone to bed, Papa and Mama remained on the porch, talking in hushed whispers. It was comforting listening to them, Mama's voice a warm, lilting murmur, Papa's a quiet, easy-flowing hum. After a few minutes they left the porch and their voices grew faint. I climbed from the bed, careful not to awaken Big Ma, and went to the

◀ *Why does Papa accept the Averys' and Laniers' decisions?*

◀ *To what does Papa compare the Logans' struggle?*

window. They were walking slowly across the moon-soaked grass, their arms around each other.

"First thing tomorrow, I'm gonna go 'round and see how many folks are still in this thing," Papa said, stopping under the oak near the house. "I wanna know before we make that trip to Vicksburg."

Mama was quiet a moment. "I don't think you and Mr. Morrison should go to Vicksburg right now, David. Not with the Wallaces threatening people like they are. Wait awhile."

Papa reached into the tree and broke off a twig. "We can't just stop taking care of business 'cause of them Wallaces, Mary. You know that."

Mama did not reply.

Papa leaned against the tree. "I think I'll take Stacey with me."

"Now, David, no—"

"He'll be thirteen next month, honey, and he needs to be with me more. I can't take him with me on the railroad, but I can take him with me where I go 'round here. And I want him to know business . . . how to take care of it, how to take care of things when I ain't around."

"David, he's just a boy."

"Baby, a boy get as big as Stacey down here and he's near a man. He's gotta know a man's things. He gotta know how to handle himself."

"I know, but—"

"Mary, I want him strong . . . not a fool like T.J."

"He's got more brains and learning than that," Mama snapped.

"I know," Papa said quietly. "Still it worries me, seeing T.J. turning like he is."

"Seems to me it isn't bothering Joe Avery much. He doesn't seem to be doing anything about it."

Papa allowed the silence to seep between them before he said, "It's not like you, honey, to be bitter."

"I'm not bitter," said Mama, folding her arms across her chest. "It's just that the boy's gotten out of hand, and doesn't seem like anybody's doing anything about it."

"The other day Joe told me he couldn't do nothing with T.J. anymore. That's a hard thing for a man to admit."

"He can still put a good strip of leather against his bottom, can't he?" It was clear that Mama was unsympathetic to Mr. Avery's problem.

"Said he tried, but his health's so poor, he ended up with a bad coughing spell. Got so sick from it, he had to go to bed. Said after that Fannie tried to whip the boy, but T.J.'s stronger

► *Why does Mama want Papa to wait?*

► *Why does Papa want to take Stacey with him?*

► *What worries Papa?*

than her, and it didn't do no good." Papa paused, then added, "He's gotten pretty sassy, too, I understand."

"Well, sassy or not," Mama grumbled, "they'd better figure out some way of getting that boy back on the right track because he's headed for a whole lot of trouble."

Papa sighed heavily and left the tree. "We'd better go in. I've gotta get an early start if I'm gonna get 'round to everybody."

"You're still set on going to Vicksburg?"

"I told you I was."

Mama laughed lightly in exasperation. "Sometimes, David Logan, I wonder why I didn't marry sweet, quiet Ronald Carter or nice, mild Harold Davis."

"Because, woman," Papa said, putting his arm around her, "you took one look at big, handsome me and no one else would do." Then they both laughed, and together moved slowly to the side of the house.

Seven families, including ours, still refused to shop at the Wallace store even with the threat of the chain gang. Mama said that the number was not significant enough to hurt the Wallaces, only enough to rile them, and she worried, afraid for Papa, Stacey, and Mr. Morrison to make the trip. But nothing she could say could change Papa's mind and they left as planned on Wednesday morning long before dawn.

On Thursday, when they were to return, it began to rain, a hard, swelling summer rain which brought a premature green darkness to the land and forced us to leave our hoeing of the cotton field and return to the house. As the thunder rumbled overhead, Mama peered out the window at the dark road. "Wonder what's keeping them," she said, more to herself than anyone else.

"Probably got held up someplace," said Big Ma. "Could've stopped to get out of this storm."

Mama turned from the window. "You're most likely right," she agreed, picking up a pair of Christopher-John's pants to mend.

As the evening fell into total darkness, we grew silent, the boys and I saying very little, Mama and Big Ma concentrating on their sewing, their brows furrowed. My throat grew tight, and without knowing why I was afraid, I was. "Mama," I said, "they all right, ain't they?"

◀ *What will happen if somebody doesn't get T.J. back on track?*

◀ *How many families still refused to shop at the Wallace store? What effect will this number have on the Wallaces?*

◀ *What happens on the night Papa, Stacey, and Mr. Morrison are to return?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

ex • as • per • a • tion (ig zas' pə rā'shən) *n.*, irritation or annoyance

rile (rīl) *vt.*, upset

► *What is Mama thinking of doing?*

Mama stared down at me. "Course they're all right. They're just late, that's all."

"But, Mama, you s'pose maybe somebody done—"

"I think you children better go on to bed," Mama said sharply without letting me finish.

"But I wanna wait up for Papa," objected Little Man.

"Me, too," said sleepy Christopher-John.

"You'll see him in the morning. Now get to bed!"

Since there was nothing we could do but obey, we went to bed. But I could not sleep. A cold fear crept up my body, churning my stomach and tightening its grip on my throat. Finally, when I felt that I was going to be sick from it, I rose and padded silently into Mama and Papa's room.

Mama was standing with her back to me, her arms folded, and Big Ma was still patching. Neither one of them heard the door swing open. I started to speak, but Mama was talking and I decided not to interrupt her. ". . . I've got a good mind to saddle Lady and go looking for them," she said.

"Now, Mary, what good would that do?" Big Ma questioned. "You runnin' 'round out there on that mare by yo'self in this darkness and rain?"

"But something's happened to them! I can feel it."

"It's just in yo' mind, child," Big Ma scoffed unconvincingly. "Them menfolks all right."

"No . . . no," said Mama shaking her head. "The Wallaces aren't just in my mind, they—" She stopped suddenly and stood very still.

"Mary—"

"Thought I heard something." The dogs started barking and she turned, half running, across the room. Pushing up the lock in a mad haste, she swung the door open and cried into the storm, "David! David!"

Unable to stay put, I dashed across the room. "Cassie, what you doin' up, girl?" asked Big Ma, swatting me as I passed her. But Mama, staring into the wet night, said nothing when I reached her side.

"Is it them?" I asked.

Out of the darkness a round light appeared, moving slowly across the drive, and Mr. Morrison's voice drifted softly to us. "Go on, Stacey," he said, "I got him." Then Stacey, a flashlight in his hand, came into sight, followed by Mr. Morrison carrying Papa.

"David!" Mama gasped, her voice a frightened whisper.

Big Ma standing behind me stepped back, pulling me with her. She stripped the bed to its sheets and ordered, "Put him right here, Mr. Morrison."

As Mr. Morrison climbed the stairs, we could see that Papa's left leg stuck straight out, immobilized by his shotgun strapped to it with a rope. His head was wrapped in a rag through which the dark redness of his blood had seeped.

Mr. Morrison eased Papa through the doorway, careful not to hit the strapped leg, and laid him gently on the bed. Mama went immediately to the bed and took Papa's hand.

"Hey, baby . . ." Papa said faintly, "I'm . . . all right. Just got my leg broke, that's all. . . ."

"Wagon rolled over it," said Mr. Morrison, avoiding Mama's eyes. "We better get that leg set. Didn't have time on the road."

"But his head—" Mama said, her eyes questioning Mr. Morrison. But Mr. Morrison said nothing further and Mama turned to Stacey. "You all right, son?"

"Yes'm," Stacey said, his face strangely ashen, his eyes on Papa.

"Then get out of those wet things. Don't want you catching pneumonia. Cassie, you go to bed."

"I'll get a fire started," said Big Ma disappearing into the kitchen as Mama turned to the closet to find sheets for making a cast. But Stacey and I remained rooted, watching Papa, and did not move until Christopher-John and Little Man made a sleepy entrance.

"What's going on?" asked Little Man, frowning into the light.

"Go back to bed, children," Mama said, rushing to keep them from coming farther into the room, but before she could reach them Christopher-John spied Papa on the bed and shot past her. "Papa, you got back!"

Mr. Morrison swung him upward before he could jar the bed.

"Wh-what's the matter?" asked Christopher-John, wide awake now. "Papa, what's the matter? How come you got that thing on your head?"

"Your Papa's asleep," said Mama as Mr. Morrison set Christopher-John back down. "Stacey, take them back to bed . . . and get out of those clothes." None of us stirred. "Move when I tell you!" Mama hissed impatiently, her face more worried than angry.

Stacey herded us into the boys' room.

◀ *What injuries has Papa sustained?*

◀ *What motivates Mama to send the children to bed?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

im • mo • bi • lize (i mō'bə līz) vt., made unable to move

► What does Stacey say about Papa's injuries?

As soon as the door closed behind us, I asked, "Stacey, how bad Papa hurt?" Stacey felt around for the lamp, lit it, then plopped wearily on the side of the bed. We huddled around him. "Well?"

Stacey shook his head. "I dunno. His leg's busted up by the wagon . . . and he's shot."

"Shot!" Christopher-John and Little Man exclaimed fearfully, but I was silent, too afraid now to speak, to think.

"Mr. Morrison says he don't think the bullet hurt him much. Says he thinks it just hit his skin . . . here." Stacey ran his forefinger along his right temple. "And didn't sink in nowhere."

"But who'd shoot Papa?" asked Little Man, greatly agitated. "Can't nobody just shoot Papa!"

Stacey stood then and motioned Christopher-John and Little Man under the covers. "I've said too much already. Cassie, go on to bed."

I continued to sit, my mind unable to move.

"Cassie, go on now like Mama said."

"How the wagon roll over him? How he get shot?" I blurted out angrily, already plotting revenge against whoever had dared hurt my father.

"Cassie . . . you go on to bed!"

"Ain't moving till you tell me!"

"I'll call Mama," he threatened.

"She too busy," I said, folding my arms and feeling confident that he would tell the story.

He went to the door and opened it. Christopher-John, Little Man, and I watched him eagerly. But he soon closed the door and came back to the bed.

"What was they doing?" asked Little Man.

"Big Ma's tending Papa's head."

"Well, what happened out there?" I repeated.

Stacey sighed despairingly and sat down. "We was coming back from Vicksburg when the back wheels come off," he said, his voice a hollow whisper. "It was already dark and it was raining too, and Papa and Mr. Morrison, they thought somebody done messed with them wheels for both of them to come off at the same time like they did. Then when I told them I'd seen two boys near the wagon when we was in Vicksburg, Papa said we didn't have time to unhitch and

► What happened in the dark on the way back from Vicksburg? What did Papa and Mr. Morrison suspect?

► Why didn't they unhitch the wagon to put the wheels back on?

Words
For
Everyday
Use

de • spair • ing • ly (di spar'ing lē) *adv.*, hopelessly

unload the wagon like we should to put them wheels back on. He thought somebody was coming after us.

“So after we found the wheels and the bolts, Papa told me to hold the reins real tight on Jack to keep him still. . . . Jack, he was real skittish ’cause of the storm. Then Mr. Morrison went and lifted that wagon all by himself. And it was heavy too, but Mr. Morrison lifted it like it wasn’t nothing. Then Papa slipped the first wheel on. . . . That’s when he got shot—”

“But who—” I started.

“A truck come up the road and stopped behind us while we was trying to get that wheel on, but didn’t none of us hear it coming ’cause of the rain and the thunder and all, and they didn’t put their lights on till the truck stopped. Anyways, there was three men in that truck and soon as Papa seen ’em, he reached for his shotgun. That’s when they shot him and he fell back with his left leg under the wagon. Then . . . then Jack reared up, scared by the shot, and I—I couldn’t hold him . . . and . . . and the wagon rolled over Papa’s leg.” His voice cracked sharply, and he exploded guiltily, “It’s m-my fault his leg’s busted!”

I thought on what he had said and, laying my hand on his shoulder, I said, “Naw, it ain’t. It’s them men’s.”

Stacey did not speak for a while and I did not prod him to go on. Finally, he cleared his throat and continued huskily. “Soon’s I could, I . . . I tied Jack to a tree and run back to Papa, but Papa told me not to move him and to get down in the gully. After them men shot Papa, they come down trying to get Mr. Morrison, but he was too fast and strong for ’em. I couldn’t see everything that happened ’cause they didn’t always stay in front of them headlights, but I did see Mr. Morrison pick up one of them men like he wasn’t nothing but a sack of chicken feathers and fling him down on the ground so hard it must’ve broke his back. Ain’t never seen nothin’ like it before in my whole life. Then one of them other two that had a gun shot at Mr. Morrison, but he didn’t hit him. Mr. Morrison, he ducked away from the headlights into the darkness and they went after him.

“Couldn’t see nothin’ then,” he said, glancing toward the door where Papa lay. “Heard bones cracking. Heard somebody cursing and crying. Then I couldn’t hear nothin’ but

◀ *What was Stacey supposed to do? When did Papa get shot?*

◀ *Why does Stacey feel guilty?*

◀ *What did Stacey see Mr. Morrison do?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

prod (prod) *vt.*, urge on by poking

the rain, and I was real scared. 'Fraid they'd killed Mr. Morrison."

"But they didn't," reminded Little Man, his eyes bright with excitement.

Stacey nodded. "Next thing I seen was a man coming real slow-like into the headlights and pick up the man lying in the middle of the road—the one Mr. Morrison thrown down. He got him into the truck, then come back and helped the other one. That one looked like he had a broke arm. It was hanging all crazy-like at his side. Then they turned the truck around and drove away."

"Then what?" Little Man inquired.

Stacey shrugged. "Nothin'. We put on the other wheel and come on home."

"Who was it?" I rasped, holding my breath.

Stacey looked at me and said flatly, "The Wallaces, I think."

There was a fearful moment's silence, then Christopher-John, tears in his dark eyes, asked, "Stacey, is . . . is Papa gonna die?"

"No! Course not!" denied Stacey too quickly.

"But he was so still—"

"I don't want Papa to die!" wailed Little Man.

"He was just sleeping—like Mama said. That's all."

"Well, when he gonna wake up?" cried Christopher-John, the tears escaping down his plump cheeks.

"In—in the morning," said Stacey, putting a comforting arm around both Christopher-John and Little Man. "Jus' you wait and see. He'll be jus' fine come morning."

Stacey, still in his wet, muddy clothes, said nothing else, and neither did the rest of us. All the questions had been answered, yet we feared, and we sat silently listening to the rain, soft now upon the roof, and watching the door behind which Papa lay, and wished for morning.

► *Who does Stacey think accosted them?*

Words
For
Everyday
Use

in • quire (ən kwī'ər) vt., ask

Respond to the Selection

How do you think Papa’s injuries will affect the Logan family?

Investigate, Inquire, and Imagine

Recall: GATHERING FACTS

- 1a. What Christmas memory does Mr. Morrison share?
- 2a. Who agrees to back the credit of the families who choose to shop in Vicksburg?
- 3a. What is Mama teaching when the visitors come to her classroom? What do they notice about her students’ books?

Interpret: FINDING MEANING

- 1b. Why does Papa say that the children need to hear Mr. Morrison’s story? Why is this story especially striking to Cassie?
- 2b. Why don’t the Logans back the other families with their land? Why is it risky even for the person who does sign?
- 3b. How do the visitors use this discovery? How does this affect the Logan family?

Analyze: TAKING THINGS APART

- 4a. Describe Cassie’s plan to get back at Lillian Jean.

Synthesize: BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

- 4b. T.J. refers to Cassie’s actions as “Uncle Tomming” Lillian Jean. Explain whether T.J. is accurate. Why doesn’t Lillian Jean understand Cassie’s actions?

Evaluate: MAKING JUDGMENTS

- 5a. Explain whether T.J. is a good friend to Stacey and whether or not he understands the value of friendship.

Extend: CONNECTING IDEAS

- 5b. What do you think are the characteristics of a good friend?

Understanding Literature

Motivation. A **motivation** is a force that moves a character to think, feel, or behave in a certain way. What motivates T.J. to talk about Mama when he goes to the Wallace store?

Symbol. A **symbol** is a thing that stands for or represents both itself and something else. Explain how the fig tree that Papa points out in chapter 9 is symbolic.

Description. A **description** gives a picture in words of a character, object, or scene. Descriptions make use of sensory details—words and phrases that describe how things look, sound, smell, taste, or feel. Identify four sensory details the author uses to describe the coming of spring in chapter 9.