

Uncle Ned and the Possum

by James Lynn Smith

Percy was the oldest of seven siblings and lived in a rural area surrounded by hills and southern piney woods. His father, David, worked hard at a cottage industry turning out axe handles on a wood lathe. The lathe-cutting bit was controlled by tracing an axe handle pattern affixed to the machinery. Final grinding and smoothing followed before the handles were shipped to a manufacturing company in Chicago. Still, income for the family was tight in this time of the Great Depression.

Percy had now come of age; he was a teenager. His mother tended to a garden, though sickly much of the time. Percy assumed responsibility for marshalling order and teaching duties to his siblings, three girls and three younger brothers. He also helped them with homework and saw that they caught the school bus on time.

But it was not all duty and work for Percy. Occasionally he would go with his mother to visit her brother Ned in Baxterville, an oil town surrounded by forests and swamps. It was a few hours away by car, so Percy's father tried to keep the old car in running condition.

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Uncle Ned was quite tall, narrow and gangly. He was knowledgeable with kind, intelligent, blue eyes that projected a look of approval and thus became Percy's favorite uncle. Ned's brother Lyle had similar build, but was less concerned with appearance. Whereas Ned often wore khakis, Lyle donned old, faded overalls. The two men lived close by and were often together. Ned had a

family but Lyle remained unattached so he could drink whisky without obligations intruding.

“Momma,” Percy asked after one visit, “Why are my uncles so different?”

“Don’t know, guess the good Lord wanted people to be different. I know Ned is very smart and looks kindly, but my brother Lyle has a face that would scare a boar hog.” She laughed. “With his big work shoes and pulled-up overalls, his ankles look like twigs. Some folks call him ‘Highpockets.’”

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The time had come for Percy to stay for a few days while his mother went back home, and he was anxious for some quality time with his brilliant uncle.

“Let’s go out back and see if Lyle has that donkey tamed yet,” Ned said.

They walked to a corral where Lyle was trying to get the donkey to accommodate weight by straddling it. Every time he got on and picked his feet up, the donkey would rear and buck .”

“Dang, my butt’s gettin’ sore doin’ this,” Lyle shouted. “It’s near pitched me off every time.”

“Listen,” Ned said, “Just put your feet on the ground every once in a while. With those long legs, it’ll just buck out from under you.” He laughed. “When the donkey settles you can squat down on its back again.”

Percy filed this event away as memory for later conversation at supertime back home. His uncle Lyle had disheveled short hair, big ears and penetrating hawk-like eyes. His wide mouth and deep facial lines made the younger Percy scared he might eat children. Now he came across as comical.

“Tonight we hunt possum, Percy,” Ned said. “You ever done that?”

He grimaced inwardly before answering, thinking an opossum was like a big rat. “Some folks near us have ate ‘em, but I never went after any.”

“Well, they’re good eatin’ if you cook ‘em right. Don’t matter they look a

bit disgusting. Around here, money's tight. I inherited a tiny bit of land with oil underneath. That's why I don't have to farm a big acreage. But the little checks really don't amount to much. Wife keeps havin' fat babies. So possum's not so bad."

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Getting ready for the hunt, they ate sweet potatoes, fried chicken and drank bitter coffee. Afterwards, Ned donned a leather vest with deep pockets and pulled down his twelve-gauge shotgun. He put number-six shot cartridges in the vest and grabbed a game bag from the closet. Then he showed Percy a carbide headlamp, demonstrated how to start it, and put it on a cap. "These are miner's caps. The front part takes the lamp and shines wherever you look."

"How does the lamp work, Uncle Ned?"

"Water trickles down from a little pot onto calcium carbide crystals below. When water gets on the crystals, it bubbles up a gas that flows up this tiny tube to the middle part of a reflector. It flames up there when you strike a match. That gas is called acetylene. The lamp throws out a light wherever you turn your head."

Percy could tell his uncle's knowledge was immense, and appreciated his simplified explanation for his uninformed nephew.

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The two began a long walk into the woods behind Ned's house. Twice they saw the reflecting eyes of an opossum, which waddled, skittered, or crept into brush, becoming inaccessible. Finally, one large opossum was in the open as they approached.

"That's a big one, boy," Ned said. "Must be the granddaddy of all possums. He's not much afraid of us, but he's still gonna play hard to get. I'll have to be smart with this one."

Percy became excited, again feeling his uncle was the epitome of knowhow,

and he muttered acknowledgement.

“What say, boy?”

“I said ‘yes sir,’ Uncle Ned.”

Having no nearby brush to run into, the animal climbed up a small tree.

“We got him treed, Percy,” Ned said. “Now we got to shoot him down.” He loaded his shotgun and looked upward, raising the weapon. “Do you see him up there?”

“I can’t see him, Uncle Ned.”

“Dang, with all the branches, I can’t see him neither. Better if he was on the ground for my shot.”

Percy looked at his uncle, expectantly. “Want me to throw something to knock him out?”

“I reckon you might as well try.”

Looking around for stones and chunks of wood suitable for throwing, Percy collected a small arsenal and started hurling objects into the tree. Nothing came close to the opossum or made much disturbance in the branches.

“Don’t think that’s workin’ much, Percy. Too dark. Tell you what, in a case like this it’s best for one of us to climb the tree while the other stays on the ground to shoot the possum when he falls out.”

“I should climb up there to throw him down?”

Ned muttered under his breath. Then louder, “No, you shake the branches till he *falls* out.”

“Oh.” Percy shinnied up the tree trunk far enough to catch hold of limbs and began his climb to the opossum’s level, or so he thought.

“You see him, Percy?”

“No, too many branches in the way.”

“Then start shakin’ the limbs. Shake hard.”

Soon the whole tree looked like a shimmering, green creature of the night, trying to shake off water. But the opossum clung tightly.

“Can you see him, Uncle Ned?” Percy called, tiring and beginning to feel a little silly.

“Nope, keep shakin’. If I could see him, I’d go ahead and shoot, branches and all—as long’s you’re not near it.”

Percy increased his shaking. He heard small branches and dead leaf clusters falling and realized that, if the opossum fell, he couldn’t identify it from other sounds.

“I’m gonna have to move closer, boy,” Ned said. “Can’t see much from way out here. Keep jigglin’ the branches.”

With exhaustion overcoming him, Percy stopped and called out, “Anything happen, Uncle Ned?” There was no response. *He’s probably mad and too polite to say anything.* “Uncle Ned?...Uncle Ned?” A half-minute passed and there was still no response, so Percy climbed down the tree. Glancing around, he didn’t see Ned. He began to feel apprehensive and looked downward to walk through the scattered debris shaken from the tree.

There was the opossum. Lying semiconscious, slowly flopping his tail back and forth. And beside him lay Ned, out cold, cap knocked off, and the carbide lamp extinguished.

Percy now realized the falling opossum hit Ned square in the face. He immediately set about helping his uncle recover and then put the opossum in the game bag.

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The next day, Uncle Ned remained quiet. He offered no clever advice or further invitations to orient his nephew on hunting. His brother dropped by and asked about the hunt, but Ned simply said they got one, offering no details. To

Percy, the slight, knowing uptick at the corner of Lyle's mouth hinted he might be brighter than he appeared.

Percy was anxious for his mother to return so he could go home. He tried his best not to smile around his Uncle Ned and several times went outside under the pretext of needing air. There he would suffer a spell of suppressed laughter, anticipating with glee the tale he now had for future entertainment.

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