

# **TAPS FOR PRIVATE TUSSIE**

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**JESSE STUART**

ILLUSTRATED BY  
**THOMAS BENTON**



*Taps For Private Tussie*

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**TO**  
**JESSICA JANE**





*Taps For Private Tussie*



## CHAPTER I



GRANDPA'S brogan shoes made a noise like whettin two rocks together as he shuffled them back and forth on the witherin school-yard grass. I stood beside Grandpa and watched him work his feet in his crumple-toed brogan shoes while the hot July wind played with Grandpa's white beard. The wind lifted Grandpa's white corn-silk beard up and down but it couldn't tear it away from his face. His beard grew to his pale face for I could see it growing there when the wind lifted it up and down. I stood beside Grandpa and looked up and down his tall body; he looked as tall as a tree to me. But Grandpa didn't look as straight as a young tree. He was bent like an old tree weighted down with branches.

"Will Mott ever get outten that coalhouse?" Grandpa asked me.

"I don't know, Grandpa," I said.

Then Grandpa rubbed his brogan shoes across the thin school-yard grass again. He put his hands behind his back and locked them together. He'd look at the coalhouse door, then he'd look at the ground. He pretended that he was a-walkin and he couldn't get anyplace. He walked in the same steps all the time and when he looked at the ground he'd squirt a mouthful of ambeer on the withered grass. It would stain the white beard around Grandpa's mouth. And it hurt my stummick to see the long slivers of ambeer hangin to Grandpa's white beard that he would catch with his tongue and pull them back into his mouth and spit them out again.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble," Grandpa whispered after he'd spit a mouthful of ambeer on the wilted grass. Then he cleaned the beard around his mouth with the elbow of his clean blue work-shirt sleeve—a sleeve that had faded with many washins. "Man born of woman is full of trouble!"

I thought Grandpa was talkin a little crazy but I could see that he was worried about somethin. I knew that somethin was wrong or there wouldn't be so many people at our house. They were our blood kin but for many days they hadn't come to see us. Some of them had never been to see us. But they had come now. The schoolhouse yard was filled with them. They'd come on the razor backs of plug horses and mules whose ribs I could have counted easy enough where they stood trying to pull the limbs of the school-yard oaks down to the hot wilted grass so they could pick them a mouthful of somethin to eat. I saw a mule nearly get one down low enough to get him a bite. But the limb wouldn't give any more and the bridle bits pulled the mule's mouth open and showed a set of bad teeth. They looked a lot like Grandpa's teeth when he opened his mouth to put a brown burley leaf behind his beardy jaw. All the mules and horses tied to the school-yard trees had bad teeth and razor backs, crooked legs and sores and some sort of afflictions about their bodies.

"Grandpa, what are you a-waitin on?" I asked him.

Just then the coalhouse door came open and Uncle Mott came out with a screwdriver in his hand.

"Is it Kim, Mott?" Grandpa asked.

"It's Kim all right," Uncle Mott said. "But, Jesus Christ, I'm sick at my stummick. I'm ready to throw up every vittal I et for my dinner!"

Uncle Mott's face had lost its sun-browned color. His face was almost as white as the milkweed furze that I've tried to catch on the meader. But the wind lifted it like it lifted Grandpa's beard—it lifted it higher and higher and I ran under it and couldn't reach it. Uncle Mott's face was nearly that white. I'd say it was more the color of a yellow clay road when it dries out in the spring. His face had the same color of dried clay where the sun has left big cracks in it. Uncle Mott's hand was tremblin too—the one he held the screwdriver in. I

thought he was a-goin to punch the sharp end of the screwdriver into his new overalls.

"How do you know it's Kim?" Grandpa asked Uncle Mott.

"That was very easy to find out, Pap," Uncle Mott said.

"Tell me how you told," Grandpa growled like a hound dog. "I want to be sure it's my boy!"

"Remember the gold upper front tooth in Kim's mouth?"

"Yep, I remember it!"

"It was there. Kim didn't have no lips and it was easy to see! Remember the two lower front teeth that Cousin Hester Tussie knocked out of Kim's mouth with a rock?"

"Yep, I remember that very well."

"They were out."

"Then you could tell it was Kim by his teeth!"

"That was not all the way I could tell it was Kim."

"What other ways could you tell?" Grandpa asked, his lips tremblin while the July wind played with his white beard, liftin it up and down so I could see where the little fine white hairs grew into Grandpa's pale lean lantern jaws—flesh the sun couldn't brown because there was too much shade on it.

"Remember the middle finger on the right hand that Kim had ground off in the cane mill?"

"Yep, I was just a-thinkin about that finger."

"Well, it was gone. I took the coffin lid plum off. I took the screws out and I lifted the lid! Then I unwrapped Kim's blanket down to his navel. That was as fur as I wanted to see. I'd seen enough when I got that fur."

"I oughta gone in there with you, Mott," Grandpa said.

"It wasn't no place for you, Pap!"

"I guess it wasn't at that!"

The screwdriver shook more and more as Uncle Mott talked to Grandpa. I didn't get close to Uncle Mott for I thought he might jab the sharp end of the screwdriver into me.

"Pap, don't go in the coalhouse," Uncle Mott warned Grandpa. "Stay outten there. That scent will knock you

down. Let the wind carry the scent out through the knot-holes of the planks before the funeral!"

"I aint a-goin, Mott," Grandpa said, his voice tremblin as he spoke. I thought maybe the beard around Grandpa's mouth was a-catchin Grandpa's words and tryin to hold them. "I don't want to see Kim like that. I want to remember 'im like he was the day he left. Like the day I saw him get on the bus for Fort Thomas, Kentucky. I didn't think Kim would get back. I had some sort of a token that he wouldn't. He was a-gettin too fur in years to make a good soldier. Kim was forty-four years old the day he left!"

We could hear a few screams now and then back in the schoolhouse. They must have come through the holes in the winderpanes the boys had knocked out with rocks before we moved into the schoolhouse. One good thing we'd done for the county school system, we had stopped the boys' knockin the winderpanes out with rocks. That's what Grandpa told a member of the County School Board when he ordered Grandpa to move outten the schoolhouse.

"It will soon be time for the funeral," Grandpa told Uncle Mott. "We'd better be a-moseyin back over to the school-house!"

We started across the wilted school-yard grass toward the schoolhouse that had once been painted. The grass felt soft and warm to my bare feet and the little puddles of sand were hot enough to burn my toes. The hot July air was smothery to breathe except when the wind blew.

"We'll haf to get Kim in the ground soon as we can," Uncle Mott told Grandpa. "Atter I opened the coffin and let fresh air into Kim—I could see more flesh a-goin. It was a-goin fast!"

"I know it," Grandpa told Uncle Mott. "But I just wanted to be sure it was my boy. I didn't want to bury some other mother's son and think he was my own. When I lay a bunch of wild roses on his grave, I want it to be on Kim's grave. God only knows what makes a body feel that way. But that's the

way I feel. I want the bones to be Kim's bones that I put flowers on and keep the briars and sprouts cleaned away!"

Grandpa pulled a big blue bandanna from his overall hip pocket and wiped sweat from his turkey-wattles red sunburnt neck just as we reached the schoolhouse doorstep. After Grandpa had wiped the sweat from his neck and pressed his sweaty beard down like fine rain-wet corn silks against his bony face, he put the bandanna back into his hip pocket and walked slowly inside the door, holdin to the door facins with his big bony hands to help himself into the house. Uncle Mott followed Grandpa into the house, nervous as weeds shaken by the wind. I had to keep clear of the sharp end of the screwdriver as I followed Uncle Mott into the schoolhouse.

"Poor Kim, he's out there in that coalhouse," Aunt Vittie wailed, wavin her arms high in the air and lettin them fall on a schoolhouse desk. "I don't know whether it's Kim or not either!"

"Don't take it so hard, Vittie," Grandma said, pattin Aunt Vittie on the back. "Take it easy, honey. These things haf to come to a body. I brought Kim into the world! I give him nourishment from my breasts. I know that it's hard to take. But we must be able to bear up under the things that the Lord sends down on us!"

Grandma was sittin on the schoolhouse seat beside Aunt Vittie. The hair on Grandma's head was white as Grandpa's beard only it wasn't stained with terbacker juice. It was clean and white as sheep wool hangin to a cluster of sawbriars where many April rains have washed it clean. That's the way Grandma's hair looked to me.

"It's Kim all right, Vittie," Uncle Mott said, his voice tremblin like the dry hickory leaves rustled by the July wind on the school yard.

I felt a little ashamed to be among so many people in the schoolhouse. My feet were a little dirty; my overalls were patched. My shirt was slit across the back and the sleeves were



out at the elbows. The schoolhouse was filled with people; but they were our people. They were the Tussies. Many of them I had never seen before. They had never been to our house and we had never been to their houses. They had come to Uncle Kim's funeral.

Now on one side of the schoolhouse we had taken the seats up so we could put the few pieces of furniture down. In the corner of the schoolhouse we had our stove. It was the schoolhouse stove, a big pot-bellied stove. We used the teacher's desk for our eatin table. And we had our beds in the front part of the schoolhouse where the long hard seats used to be. But we had carried them out and put them under the schoolhouse floor. This was the best house that we had ever lived in. We didn't even haf to chop wood here, for the coalhouse had a lot of coal in it when we moved here. That was just after school was out last January. And it was the warmest house we had ever lived in.

"How do you know it's Kim?" Vittie asked Uncle Mott.

"He's got the gold tooth in front and the finger off," Mott told her.

"I want to see 'im," Aunt Vittie screamed, hittin the desk top with her lean shriveled hands.

"But you mustn't see 'im," Uncle Mott said. "I warn you, Vittie, not to look at Kim! It's Kim all right—that's all you want to know!"

"For three years I aint seen 'im," she wailed like wind in the hickory tops around the schoolhouse in February.

I looked over the schoolhouse. In many of the seats young people were a-sittin and whisperin to one another. There were big smiles on their faces. That was what Grandpa called "sparkin." There was a lot of sparkin a-go in on at Uncle Kim's funeral. Old people sat with their faces restin in their hands and their elbows braced on the desk tops. I didn't see many tears shed. Just a few of the old women shed tears when Aunt Vittie carried on. Aunt Vittie was a-doin most of the weepin.