

Plot

Chapter 1

Early one morning on a cold February day, Richard, Gus and Pa go deer hunting. Richard deliberately misfires to avoid killing a deer. His father is disappointed and allows Richard to skip deer hunting in the future.

Gus tries to encourage his brother to take up sports and advises Richard to be more conforming. However, Richard prefers to indulge in his world of poetry.

Richard goes to his room to reflect on past events and writes a poem about the first deer that he witnessed being killed when he was 8 years old. The poem is then locked in a drawer as he does not want anyone to read it.

Chapter 2

It is the month of April and America has declared war on Germany. One morning, Mrs. Hansen, Richard's English teacher introduces a poem to the class entitled "Trees" by a famous poet named Joyce Kilmer. She tells the class that Joyce Kilmer has just volunteered to join the army in World War 1. Richard is fascinated by the simple poem and borrows the book from Mrs. Hansen. He secretly takes down the office address of *The New York Times* editor.

On the way home, Richard meets Hannah Schermer, a pretty, young blonde girl of German descent who is crying because someone has written the words "Dirty Hun" on her book. Richard is angered by this and confronts his classmates who then expose their hatred towards Germans.

At home, Richard decides to write to Kilmer. Richard praises Kilmer for enlisting in the army and tells Kilmer how he enjoys reading Kilmer's poems. Richard also shares his secret on poetry writing. He then sends the letter to *The New York Times*.

Chapter 3

The tavern owned by the Schermers is vandalised. Mrs. Hansen asks her class to sign a card expressing sympathy to the Schermers. However, several class bullies prevent some students from signing the card. This shocks Mrs. Hansen. When Richard signs the card, he is taunted. After class, Richard approaches his teacher and asks for the card as he wants to personally deliver the card to the Schermers. When he reaches the tavern, Richard notices the words "Dirty Huns" painted in red paint.

On the way home, Richard is surprised to see his sister, Angie running towards him with news that he has got a letter from New York.

Chapter 4

Richard is thrilled to receive the letter from Kilmer, who encourages him to continue to write poems. He is disappointed that his family members do not show much enthusiasm about the letter as they do not know who Kilmer is. Richard is reminded by Gus to 'fit in' with society and keeps his distance from the Schermers.

Next morning, Richard shows Kilmer's letter to Mrs. Hansen. She is very impressed. She helps Richard to select a few of his poems to be sent to Kilmer. She also asks him to read Kilmer's letter and a few of his own poems to the class. However, he refused.

After Richard leaves the school building, he meets Hannah. She tells him that some kind neighbours have helped to clean up the cruel words written on their tavern. The neighbours promise that they will prevent this cruel action from being repeated.

Chapter 5

It is the end of the school year. Mrs. Hansen invites Richard to share Kilmer's letters and his poem about thunderstorms with the class. Richard feels very nervous. However, some of his classmates looked at him with newfound respect.

Mr. Higby, the History teacher highlights the fact that the Huns who invaded Europe were from Mongolia and are not related to the Germans. He reminds the class that history is being created all the time.

Richard spends the summer working in the farm with Pa. He notices that Pa is always unhappy and keeps to himself. So, one night, he writes a poem about his father.

A few weeks later, Richard receives a reply from Kilmer. In the letter, Kilmer praises Richard's poem about soldiers and hopes that "the war will end all wars".

Richard continues to think about Hannah and writes a poem about her.

Chapter 6

Richard and Kilmer continue to correspond with each other throughout the summer. With each letter, Richard includes a poem to Kilmer. In return, Kilmer encourages and provides suggestions to Richard about his poetry.

In September, Kilmer arrives in France and shares his fear of fighting on the battlefield with Richard. Richard is concerned about the safety of the poet. He also wonders if he and Gus will have to enlist if the war does not end.

When school reopens, Mrs. Hansen announces her plans to hold a patriotic programme to sell Liberty Bonds to help finance the war. The show involves singing, music and acting. The two main characters are Lady Liberty and Doughboy.

All the students secretly want to play the roles of the two main characters. However, Richard is selected to play Doughboy and Hannah Schermer plays Lady Liberty because they have written the two best essays. In the end, Richard is the only one who applauds Hannah when she reads her essay to the class.

Chapter 7

Richard senses that some of the students are pleased with Hannah's essay but are too afraid to show their appreciation because of the class bullies. The following day, a few parents approach the principal of the school to question Mrs. Hansen's selection of the role for Lady Liberty.

The next day, Mrs. Hansen announces that Hannah has turned down the role of Lady Liberty, so Richard also gives up the role of Doughboy. He does this to give moral support to his friend, Hannah. Mrs. Hansen then chooses Millie and Herbie as replacements for the two leading roles.

During lunch, Hannah invites Richard to her house for supper. Richard informs Gus that he is not able to have dinner at home. Gus says that Richard is unpatriotic and calls him a traitor.

Richard walks Hannah home and spends a wonderful time with the Schermers. It is soon dusk when Richard reaches his own house where Pa is waiting for him on the porch.

Chapter 8

Pa asks Richard why he has turned down the role as Doughboy. Richard explains that he wants to show support to Hannah and it is unfair for the class bullies to gang up on Hannah. The father of one of his classmates, Ike Lewis, accuses Richard of siding with the Schermers and the Germans. Pa reminds Richard of Ike's kindness when he broke his leg three years ago. Pa blames poetry for filling Richard's head with "foolish ideas". This saddens Richard very much.

Most of the students ignore Richard in school. Nevertheless, he is not bothered as he spends most of his time at the Schermers' home. He shares his poetry with them and they understand him well.

Subsequently, Richard receives a sad letter from Kilmer who misses celebrating Christmas with his family. Kilmer enjoys Richard's poem about the oak tree and grieves about the destruction of the forests in France. To cheer Kilmer up, Richard sends him a package containing Hannah's cookies and a scarf knitted by her mother for him.

A picnic is planned at Turtle Lake on the last day of school. Richard and Hannah sit away from the others under a big oak tree. Richard carves a heart with their initials R and H on the tree trunk. This romantic moment is interrupted when someone throws a stone at Hannah's foot. The stone had the word "Hun" on the flat side of it.

Chapter 9

Pa is disheartened when Gus announces that he has enlisted in the army and is leaving for basic training. Gus tries to convince his father that he can survive the war, but his father does not believe him. Pa becomes silent and distant after Gus has gone. Richard talks to Angie, his sister, about their father's state of mind because they both know that Pa is worried about Gus.

Richard finds great relief when he spends time with the Schermers. In July, he sends Kilmer his latest poem and receives a quick reply praising him for being a good poet. Kilmer advises Richard to read the works of other living poets to understand their abilities.

Richard wants to know how poets make the world a better place and decides to write a letter to Kilmer. He wants to mail the letter quickly. He goes to Hannah's house to ask her to accompany him to the post office but when Hannah opens the door, she cries, "Your friend Mr. Kilmer has been killed!"

Chapter 10

Richard is shocked to receive such news. Mrs. Schermer shows him the newspaper report surrounding Kilmer's death and how his comrades have buried him in France. Richard is too shocked to cry. As reality sinks in, he realises that he still has his letter to Kilmer in his hip pocket, suddenly, tears fill his eyes, so he quickly thanks the Schermers and runs to his oak tree where he cries freely.

When he goes home, Richard writes the poem, "In Memory of Sergeant Joyce Kilmer". He shares the poem with the Schermers because only they are able to understand how he feels. Mr. Schermer suggests that Richard sends the poem to Turtle Lake Weekly to be published. A few days later, the poem is published. Richard buys the newspaper and sees his poem on page 3.

At home, Pa shares a memory about Uncle Ronald who died in the Battle of El Carney to comfort Richard. Pa breaks down and Richard reaches out to console him. Pa is amazed at Richard's ability to use certain words in his poem.

In mid-November, the Allies win the war. Richard works at the farm, and he spends more time with Hannah and her family. Soon his poems are featured in the local daily. Pa shares some ideas and suggestions concerning some of Richard's poems that relate to farm life. Richard is appreciative of this as it reminds him of Mr. Kilmer.