

A STAR OVER LAKE WACCAMAW

by

Louis D. Mitchell

George Hosea Moore first saw the memorable star in the twilight of a clear autumn evening. As the earliest planet jumped into that North Carolina sky, an answering gleam was a bright red across the lake. It almost appeared to be a star. Later on in the evening--Mr. Moore was enchanted by the picture so much so that he stood there entranced--myriads of other, whiter lights in a moonless sky competed for glory. They were all athrob in the great conclave of a vaulted heavens. In spite of the celestial beauty, there was something impressive, something very attractive to the young man's eye--something fascinating about the solitary earthly star across the lake. It was changeless, motionless, and ever red against the frivolous alterations of the heavens. Mr. Moore never tired of looking at it. In fact, it was the spell this particular night that broke the tendency to look upward on especially starry nights.

A few days passed, but every evening Mr. Moore would find himself again down at the edge of the lake at dusk. It is one of those mysterious

wonders that on hot summer Columbus County days in the afternoon one can stand on the northern bluff of Lake Waccamaw and look toward the southwest. If it is on time--somewhere about four o'clock--a deep rich dark blue line starts to extend itself all of the way across the glistening lake as it advanced. It breaks against the northern shore and there is music everywhere, like a remembered song that hums in the mind long after its occasion has ceased. Before this phenomenal spectacle occurs, however, a cooling breeze encloaks the town of Lake Waccamaw. It is no wonder that this beautiful little town was incorporated in 1911 by a board of five councilmen, for they knew virgin beauty firsthand. George Hosea Moore, from his vantage point on the western edge of the lake, must have enjoyed this enchanting breeze as it lasted throughout the night and died out early in the morning of the next day.

His mother had told him that the folks of Columbus County were proud of this large body of water, fed by First Little, Second Little, Third Little, and Fourth Little Creeks. It is seven miles long and five miles wide and is the largest natural lake between Maine and Florida. She had learned that down at the Hickory Hill School in Miss Josephine Freeman's class.

"Before the white man came," she said, "Lake Waccamaw, son, was a lake some of our Indian folks used. There's a place called Indian Mounds, on the east side of the lake and on the site of one mound Grandma and Grandpa and other folks used to tell me nothing will grow."

George had already read in the Whiteville "News Reporter" the statements of Kinchen Council Columbus County Historian. George was impressed by his familiarity with the statements of Chief Osceola,

who led a group of Seminoles in their war against the white men. The Indian was born on Lake Waccamaw. Osceola was a child when the American Government mercilessly moved the Indians from this section of North Carolina down to Georgia.

He would sit on a large rock and vaguely speculate about that earthly star. That beautiful spark seemed to have kindled his very soul; it lit the wick of his active imagination. He knew well, of course, about its prosaic origin, for he had already asked Uncle Henry Freeman about it. He wished he had not, for sometimes the very issuance of raw truths are not only disturbing in themselves but they are destructive of innocence, hopes, and dreams. "I suppose," he said with his eyes still looking straight ahead at that star, "the poet, Emily Dickinson, was right when she said 'It's best we are dreaming ...'"

"That thar star," said Uncle Henry Freeman, whose bright blue eyes twinkled as a broad smile pushed itself down and across his aquiline nose and thick lips, "ain't no sech a thing as a star. Jess an ol'd lahte in Lonnie Henry Spaulding's house. Ain't nothin' else," he said as he enjoyed killing the aesthetic picture that his nephew had painted. "Shoa ain't nare thing moa, son." He removed the corncob pipe from his Negroid lips and emitted a cloud of strong North Carolina tobacco smoke. "The house ain't nothin' but a tininessy walk from the shoa of the lake. You passes that thar ol' house--ain't nothin' to look at--when you comes oan down the lake road from St. James and goes through them thar woods just north of the lake." He leaned back in his moth-eaten chair and puffed again.

"Uncle Henry," George Hosea Moore inquired, "why is it so pretty against the sky?"

"Ah don't know, son, but finds e'brything's perdie down hiar. Don't know whut they's learned you up thar in New York, but George Hosea Moore, son of mah sister, that thar lahght's nothin' but cousin Spaulding's house. That whut 'tis. He's a blacksmith and he kin show shoe horses, when he ain't drunk, as he mos'ly is. Lawd hab mercy, that man show kin put it down. Lawd, ah'd rather pay his food bill then habe to pay fur his licker. Lawd sake alive, it show is sum'un too, 'cause that thar ol' Billie Jacobs makes it not to fur down the road from him. They tells me Billie Jacobs makes it in a great big ol'd tub. Show muss be sum'um to make. Show funny too, funny 'cause Billie Jacobs don't drink. He jess 'causes these hiar other fools to get drunk and hurt theirselves. It show's a crahme, show is," he continued as he blew more pipe smoke up to the ceiling of his little wooden house.

Mr. Moore crossed his legs nervously, opened a pack of cigarettes, turned around to face his uncle and asked, "Uncle Henry, do you suppose that light comes from his forge?"

"That thar forge ain't run moa 'n half the day, son, let 'lone at nahght." He smiled again, drew on the old pipe and said, "Ah ain't been studyin' ol' man Lonnie in recent yars. Show is a mess. Cain't fur the lahfe of me figure out how he done got that way. Ah ain't never heared tell of Lonnie workin' at nahght--or in the daytahme neither, ef he kin git 'way with it. Lawd, son, you's gittin' into some deep waters, Ah kin tell. Wish you'd leave them folks 'lone, Hosea, wish you wou-ud. They jess ain't no goo-ud. They ain't worth a 'am Ah born to dah,' fur show. Show 'nough you's got 'nough to do without gittin' messed up over thar, Hosea. Your ma sint you down hiar

to ress a little bit. You folks that go up north to study an' gits all smart and a little hainty ain't very smart seems lahke to me. Well, Bahble says man do git weaker and wahser. Lawd sakes, Hosea, go into the kitchen and tell yoa aunt I wants some of that thar fatback we had with the greens fur dinner. Show was goo-ud."

George Hosea--that's what his family called him--stood up and sashayed off to the country kitchen to deliver the message. "Mama told me," as he passed a quick smile across his red-skinned face, "Uncle Henry Freeman could eat more meat in one day than any hungry tiger. Good heavens, he's already eaten three slabs of bacon for breakfast after eating five whole sausages. He ate one whole chicken by himself for lunch. Tonight I tried to count it all but after the fatback slices, the huge hunk of ham, and three pork chops, I just lost track. Now here he is asking Aunt Callie for more. When does he get sick with all of this? I have been here four days already, and Uncle Henry has eaten five chickens by himself. Mama sure knows her relatives. I thought she was exaggerating. She said that Uncle Henry ought to live out in the smokehouse. 'Ain't no use'n bringing the meat out 'cross that field to the house,' Mama used to say. Well, she warn'd me and I have to believe everything she has ever said. 'Ain't tellin' you no lahe, chile, 'bout yoa Uncle Henry Freeman. Yoa brother's jess lahke 'im,' Mother used to go on. I never paid any attention to Mother but now I know she was not short of the truth."

George Hosea Moore returned from the kitchen with a huge platter loaded with fatback and all sorts of meats. He placed it beside the older man and said nothing. He turned away and his thoughts went back to that earth star on the other side of Lake Waccamaw. He fell back

into his reverie. Somehow, even seeing the star through the prosaic and merciless lens of reality--the staunch enemy of dreamers--George Hosea Moore was not distracted from the star's poetic attraction.

Somehow for George Hosea Moore there was a strange paradox at hand. The greater the effort, he knew, the meaner the reward. Yet, if peace were sought here at this gorgeous lake side, surrounded by gnarled water oaks, cedar, and gangling pines festooned with Spanish moss, if rest or repose was the good desired, the very natural world itself, flowers and trees and their native inhabitants were ready to supply that good. Here George had found the quiet and innocence in this garden spot--even as the poet Andrew Marvell had done in his "Garden". They had both sought that peace before, among men. But he knew that in the end these are sacred, supernatural pleasures which are not to be found on this earth. He had to conclude that society at its finest is but barbarism in comparison to this delicious solitude; but he, like Eve and Adam before him and the exiled Israelites after them, was destined to pine for and regret having to leave this idyllic sight where the society of men did not seem to be needed. In spite of his Calvinist background, George Hosea Moore concluded that paradise was too good for him for Adam's Eden must have been something like this. It all had to have been before Eve, for she did not multiply his joy and pleasure, she merely divided it in two. It was all too inevitable then and now for he, George Hosea Moore, was only a mortal man. Thus he could not bear such happiness and had been given a fraction of it. He never failed to go down to the lake side and look for it. His heart would jump, suspend itself for a short moment, and then descend into his reverie at the first glinting in the azure

evening. His eyes would water when the red reflection was aglow, joining the other celestial lights over the lake. Some nights, of course, the mist rose above the scene and hid the sight from him. He would then gaze at the spot where that star had disappeared, feeling a calm satisfaction to know that it was still shining beneath the curtain of clouds. He consoled and encouraged himself in this profound sentimentality. These eventide effects--considered peculiar by Uncle Henry and Aunt Callie--seemed a fitting sequel to the picturesque day of a plentiful harvest on the one hand and a meat-consuming uncle on the other. But George Moore convinced himself that the bright spot of color over the night-shrouded lake of his black, Indian and white ancestors added a romantic fervor to his primitive feeling when he stood looking across the lake. The enthusiasm ministered to that keen susceptibility of impressions which was the sensitive aggregate of his mother's delight in art and his father's sensitivity to mortal needs. It is eminently characteristic of a highly wrought heart, mind, and soul.

He said little more to Uncle Henry Freeman, for he knew the state of affairs between him and his distant relatives across the large lake. Vast as the difference was between George and his uncle in mind and cultivation, his observation of the older man was sympathetic yet critical, kind, and distant. In all, however, he was convinced that perhaps Uncle Henry was objecting to the very same characteristics in Mr. Lonnie Spaulding that Uncle Henry himself possessed. Perhaps both of them were either incapable of comprehending delicate musings, or they had once tried them but found them frightening, insupportable, and wanting. Uncle Henry was essentially a man of this world--trying

to eat it away in his carnivorous longings. His mental and moral conclusions were the result of his training in the Protestant ethic--mercantile in that the best output comes from the best outlay of work and effort. His stock market of thoughts was not liable to fluctuations. God was in His heaven and all had to be right with His world. Uncle Henry confirmed himself in this every Sunday when Reverend Freeman preached. What other church could be like St. James' Baptist Church? Aunt Callie had attended Rehobeth Methodist Church up ahead before she married him, but he decided that she had better go with him to services since "a house divided against itself could not stand," according to Uncle Henry Freeman's theology.

Cousin Lonnie, on the other hand, had decided that all was lost to him and the world could only be handled with a bottle of home-made liquor. He was told why God had placed him on this earth, but he could not see what his worth was to himself or anyone else. He could only manage the constant depression with fire water and subsequent sleep. He was told the ways of the Lord, and he repeated them often to his children. He was strict with them, knowing that what he said was right. What he did he thought that he could not help. At least the children went to church and did right by the Lord, that was enough for him right now. Had he not married, had three girls and one boy? Had he not brought them up to take care of themselves? Had his wife not died early leaving him with a practical moron on his hands? What more could life take of him? "So," he would cry out against the world, "Henry Freeman goes to church and Ah goes to the bottle. Don't know, show don't know."

Thus, George Hosea Moore was alone in his reverie, singular in

his dreams, and lonely because he could not share his poetic delight, and all that melancholy means to the human heart. He looked forward to the evenings when he could go down to the lake and sit in contemplative silence. Later when night completed its fall, he would listen to the unrehearsed, mysterious tonality of lyrics welling up from the myriads of the nocturnal voices of rock, vegetable, fowl, fish, and animals. His moods were moments of sweet melancholy--both sad and happy. Like most of us when engulfed by this sensibility, he did not comprehend the universe as it weighed upon him. He reveled in it and therefore could bear its weight--gravely, serenely--because it was so huge and old but joyfully, too, because he felt his strength even as he dreamed.

Often, with book in hand, George H. Moore would find his way down to the side of Lake Waccamaw during the day. The warm autumnal North Carolina sun--the midwife of uncounted births in this county--appeared to Moore to be the foremost critic of the land and its inhabitants. The red light of the earthly star against the brilliant sky was nothing but a gauzy curl of smoke, barely visible. Though pedestrian in appearance, Moore knew that this single sign of human habitation would become at night the gayest of the planets, at which time it would move on and in fairness give the night its chance with whatever odds it needed to be radiant. Aunt Callie, seeing the young man's interest, played its appearance down as being nothing more than Cousin Lonnie's little log house, one of the few in the area, hidden in "them thar old pines," she would say. It had a large window on the side facing the lake. Nearby was the forge, silent and smokeless. "Every tahme Ah seen it," she remonstrated, "it was a dirty little

spot."

Aunt Callie cooked up one of her sumptuous meals one evening. George Moore commented to himself that he had never seen so much meat on one table in his life. "Yes," he added to himself, "not only is there a huge amount of meat on this table but look at Uncle Henry Freeman's plate along with the other plates surrounding him. Good night, Sweet Baby Moses! Great day in the morning! He's going to eat all that?" George exclaimed.

Four pieces of chicken, fried, of course; two slabs of ham; two pork chops; three slices of fatback cooked with the turnip greens, were all piled high on his main plate. On the side rested a piece of hoecake, a side dish of butterbeans, a saucer loaded with country sausage, a plate of pigsfeet, a dish of chicken feet, and a bowl of chitlins. The blessing was asked and Uncle Henry said not a word, only Aunt Callie and George finding time and desire to converse. Uncle Henry chewed, grunted, spit, crammed, sighed, slobbered, and pushed food at his mouth with alarming speed and regularity. Talking with one's mouth full was, he thought, a violation on two accounts--it was poor table manners, and a waste of time.

George observed the spectacle and about half way through Uncle Henry's violent assault on the meat he excused himself from the table. Still incredulous after having washed up, he left the little home of his mother's birth and made his way to the edge of the lake. The sky was dark this night but thanks to the kerosene lantern he carried with him, he could see well enough to get into the little canoe that he had asked his uncle's permission to use. He pushed away from the shore, put out the lantern, and headed across Lake Waccamaw with purpose.

Like the three kings of old, he was guided by that hanging star that came to rest over another humble abode.

The water was dark as the shadowy walls of the woods glided by him. He did not seem able to tell the woods from the reflection. The canoe slid quietly across the gentle water as if on glass. He felt in his bones, heard it acutely, and smelled it enjoyably that life was all around. George became a living part of the night himself. As the young man's ears grew keener--he was treasuring every moment--his skin began to creep as if it were trying to help him hear. An owl whooted by in search of some nocturnal delight. The skip of a deer sounded like a raindrop. The mockingbird sang its tapering notes and phrases, repeated time and time again, before going on to another variation. Another mockingbird, followed by another, and then another, mimicked other songsters in fugal progressions filling the heavenly choir with imitative and harmonic excellence. Their mocking mimicry caught George's fancy as a display of wit, satire, irony, and luscious pathos in antiphonal splendor. The interpolations of motifs from other songsters' incantations, the extraneous issuings of improvisations from the dense brush and from the edges of treetops of a harmonic landscape blended into a nocturnal wonder of sound and sense. They choired as though determined to heat every drop of both myth and romance in the human heart to a tenderness. The night birds' song thrills and trills swung the complete light-struck night to excite and arouse George's sense of mystery, to the disturbance of being human, to a promise, and to the insecurity of knowing mortal inadequacy.

Into his nose there stole a faint odor--a mixture of all of the autumnal growth in and along the edges of a plentiful lake. Some frogs

crooned, a pebble fell into the water somewhere about quietly imposing on the silence. Some disturbed fishes rippled by the edge of the canoe and moved on to more peaceful places. Suddenly, the splendor of light broke out of the darkness as the other stars plunged through the overhead canvas to join the now radiant earth star in the distance. George knew at that moment that this scene would remain forever a happy memory during the rest of his life.

A deer on the edge of the lake turned to face the onrush of the new light. George thought that the handsome image was a noble surprise in nature. The deer's head turned upward and George thought that he could see its eyes turn to fire. Hardly had the beautifully proportioned picture registered on the observer's eye when it rose on its hind legs to whirl and gain distance in one lofty leap. All living things are drawn by brightness like birds to light, like moths to candles.

The canoe grew near the shore, passing through and over lily pads. Their upright buds were gold as they glided back and forth in the shimmering ripples. The stars overhead were now bright, glimmering, twinkling, and peeping out of an arabesque. The earth star grew ugly, uniform, and coppery as the canoe reached the shore. Disappointment set in for an illusion, as ever, had been shattered. The real stars were up above; the imagined was forging just ahead with smoke pursuing it. Man lives in a world which he cannot dominate, a world always aware of him. His passions are important to him because he considers that they are felt again and again through all time and all space, for man is never changed. George Hosea Moore had reached the end of a dream but now had to explain that shattered dream's origin to himself.

He returned home the same way he had come with more purpose than pleasure. He tied up Uncle Henry's canoe, lit the lantern, looked back across the lake and again was moved by the illusion created by the earth star all over again. George caught his breath once more, stopped, looked again, smiled at himself, then turned homeward beneath a lurid sky which touched the flat Columbus County ground in the far distance.

He came up to the home of his uncle, stopped in front of it, looked again towards the lake, and then entered.

"Lawd hab mercy, son, we's commencin' to worry 'bout you. You's bin gwoin' sum, more than an hour. Is you all rahght, Hosea?" greeted Uncle Henry.

"We's all ready had one of them thar ol'd visits from Miss Lollie. She seems lahke she prayin' moa and moa these hiar days. Ah declare," continued Aunt Callie. "She ain't been hiar moa than fahve tahmes durin' her tahre life. But she's sho been comin' tho' since she's commenst to prayin ober everybody."

"Show wish she'd stayed home. Ah's taherd her nonsince," continued Uncle Henry. "Seems to me she needs to pray fur herself."

"Lawd hab mercy," answered Aunt Callie. They seemed not to be able to exhaust the subject of Miss Lollie, "any so evil as that thar woaman needs a heap of prayin'. She show makes a fuss when she gits down oan them thar dirty knees. Lawd save her soul, show 'nough when that thar spirts gits in 'er. They say she show tears up that thar new Miss Lollie's timple, too. Uncle Lonnie goes thar whin he's sober, and that ain't offin, show ain't."

George was preparing to excuse himself from Uncle Henry Freeman's

customary banquet of meat when his attention was caught by the sound of voices outside the front door. He jumped up, wondering who would call at this hour, and moved quickly to the front window. "Who is it coming to visit at this time of the night," he ejected. "My goodness," he exclaimed as he turned back towards Uncle Henry and Aunt Callie, "it's Miss Lollie Freeman! Didn't you say she was here earlier this evening? O, well," he concluded, "I suppose she's forgotten something."

"Oh, no!" asserted Uncle Henry, "she ain't forgit nare thing, son, she's come back to talk to you and show thing, she's gwoina warn you 'bout them thar folks, Lonnie and his daughter. Jess watch whut Ah's a tellin' you."

"Daughter!" repeated George, "you haven't told me about a daughter, Uncle Henry."

"Ain't Ah? Well, ain't no reason fur not tellin' you. She's a tininsy bit tech in the haid, Ah believes, but thar ain't no tahme to talk 'bout that now."

"Ah reckon not," Aunt Callie announced haughtily, "she's 'bout at the doa, Hosea, open it fur 'er."

"Lawd knows whut tahme she's gwoin' to leave this hiar house. Ah Swannee, Lawd knows Ah's full an' tahred. Now hiar she comes with that thar 'pa-rayah'," Uncle Henry protested.

The door was opened and in marched Miss Lollie Freeman all by herself. She had tied up the horse singlehandedly, proudly, and returned to the Freeman household. Miss Lollie claimed that she and Uncle Henry Freeman were cousins when she was in the presence of Uncle Henry and Aunt Callie or talking to anyone of their immediate family. When she was safely stocked away in the company of her friends

and relatives, she would deny every bit of it.

"You show muss be 'Lyda Freeman's big boy," she announced as she moved into the house past George, who was holding the door open for her. "Ah show kin see the favor, sho kin!" she exclaimed. "Ah wuz hiar before and Ah though Ah'd return to tell you a little sum'un 'bout some of the folks down hiar. Don't wants any trouble but you's mah cousin jess lahke yoa ma and lahke Cousin Henry and Cousin Callie hiar. Ah wants to warn you 'bout a little sum'un."

Uncle Henry rolled his big blue eyes quickly at his wife, then at his nephew as if to say triumphantly, "Didn't Ah tell you?" He knew her ways after so many years. He disliked her intrusions, her hypocrisy, and above all her minding everybody's business. He knew that after trying to talk George out of visiting the Spauldings across Lake Waccamaw she would try to arrange a little meeting between George and one of her three remaining daughters. She had already gone to four weddings that she had arranged. She knew that three of them were absolutely necessary if there was to be any respectability left among her people. She would not have such disgraceful conducts within the reaches of her family.

"Well, Ah's a bit tahred, son, but Ah thought Ah better come rahght back over hiar and talk to you real personalbe-lahke. You seems to be a nahce young man. You's quahte nahce lookin', too. Show favors yoa ma, mah cousin. We growed up together, son, show di-id. We'd even eat together and shar things 'cause none of urs had much to eat. But what'er we had we'd show would shar, Lawd, yes, how we wuz jess 'bout sisters, son, jess 'bout. Ah'd say we wuz closer than sisters, show would say such a thing. Ah'm glad you's

come down hiar to stay with urs fur a whahle. Show is nahce to have you. You's now one of urs," she said with that definitude that holds only the truth of the moment.

"Thank you, Miss Lollie," George said politely. They sat down near one another on the sofa and that was the end of the silence. She went on and on as if quiet would bring on certain disaster. Uncle Henry grit his few remaining teeth, longed for a piece of pork, lowered his blue eyes and nodded to the left and to the right. He was sure he would wake up during the final prayer and have to hold off his laughter. He had been scolded about that several times, but had never learned to completely control his amusement when Miss Lollie fell down on her big boney knees and commenced her benedictions. He knew that that was why he could never go off to Miss Lollie's Temple for Sunday services. He was absolutely certain that he could not keep a straight face, and his sister, Rhodie, and his wife, Callie, had warned him about being so impolite in front of that "good ol'd woaman."

"Well, son," started Miss Lollie, "they tells me you is fascinated by that lahght over the lake. They says it's got you all 'cited lahke. Well, son, it ain't that thar star of Behlehem, show ain't. That thar star leads to hell. Ah knows. Them thar Spauldings is different. They ain't related to none of urs." Miss Lollie was quite capable of making up family relations on the spot, especially when the family was either pleasing or displeasing to her purposes. "They's another set of Spauldings, as yoa ma has already told you. They's darker than urs. Well, you's gotta be kiarful cause they drinks theirselves near 'bout to death. That thar itty-bitty woman thar ain't Lonnie's, at leass bah his daid wahfe. She's moa

lahke one of them thar illegitimate children. Po thing, no wonder she's real puny. Livin' with Lonnie Spaulding show muss be hard. Ah's bin over thar to pa-ray with 'em but Lawd knows they ain't got no since 'bout pa-raying and things that has to do with the Lawd. Gawd bless you, son. Ah sees you knows all 'bout those spiritual ways 'cause if it waren't fur Gawd we'd be nowhar rahght now. Stay way from over yonder, son, do it fur mah sake and fur the sake of the Lawd."

George had known something like this would happen. His mother had told him about Miss Lollie, but never had she told him of a serious consequence. She and his father had mimicked her, laughed at themselves and at her, and ended the conversation in gales of guffaws. George had never known her profound deviations between poles of ill will and calumny. He braced himself because he knew that more was about to pour forth. "Uncle Henry is lucky," he mused, "he's fast asleep. Aunt Callie is diverting herself with her crocheting."

"Well, son," she never broke stride in her battle with undesirable silence, "Ah wants you to stop over my house very soon. You has some perdy cousins over yonder. Show finer than that thar Spaulding shack. Show is funny how an ol'd forge kin make such a perdy lahght over a lake lahke that. Well, all that glitters ain't gol'," she asserted, convinced by her own moralizing. "Ah's got three perdy girls and you's a fahne lookin' boy. It show would be nahce to have another union in our fam'ly 'mongst urs down hiar in Columbus County. Ah'd perform the ceremony mahself at Miss Lollie's Temple, but folks 'ud talk 'bout it and maybe it jess ain't rahght fur a mother to marry her daughter off to her cousin. Well, show 'nough, you's jess rahght for anyone of them.

Now, son, git down hiar with me oan you knees and we'll jess say a little pa-rayah. People show don't luv one 'nother the way they used to. Lawd knows, whut you needs is a little pa-rayah jess lahke everybody else."

She pulled the young man down to the floor with her and they knelt together leaning against the little sofa with elbows on the seat. "Our Heavenly Father," Miss Lollie commenced, "we thank Thee fur this moment to make wrongs rahght. We thank Three for this chance to offer Thee a little pa-rayah."

Uncle Henry was awake now, shaking his head a little to the right and to the left, holding his bulging girth with both hands and arms as if to prevent explosion. His face grew bright and then dim with uncontrollable amusement and then sudden discipline from years of practice. Aunt Callie pinched him underneath the table which caused a total breakdown. Uncle Henry Freeman's ability to control his laughter was as weak as was his resistance to eating meat. He rolled his big light eyes at his wife as if to say, "Well, Ah'll be all rahght now," whereupon he disguised a snicker in an affected cough.

"Thank you, Gawd, fur this house, this hiar family, and this hiar young mayon who's a sign of the future. Make his lahfe fruitful, and protect him from all the evils and waywardness of these days of wickedness and sin. We're nothin' in yoa hands, Dear Gawd, and we pray that we shall all be together some day real soon. We pray fur ourselves and fur all of those near and fur 'way from urs. Bless this earth, bless this house, bless this home, bless our church, and bless Columbus County an' all the folks in it. We ask you this in Jesus' name, Amen."

Antiphonal "amens" were heard from three people with different meanings, although thanksgiving for having completed an ordeal was common to all.

Miss Lollie, convinced of her success, excused herself, walked to the door and bid everyone a fond adieu. Her mission, she was certain, had been fulfilled. "Gotta git oan home," she announced as she passed through the door held by young George Hosea Moore, "them thar girls of mahne show's a gotta be watched. Lonnie Spaulding's a mean ol'd bastard when he's a drinkin' an' that am all the tahme, show 'nough. Well, see yall later," she proclaimed as she moved out into the night.

George said nothing, turned to his aunt and uncle and said goodnight. They smiled slightly and bid him the same. He went off to his room, tired, disgusted, and somewhat ashamed of having said nothing. He felt that he had given consent to all of Miss Lollie's hypocrisies by saying not one word against her unwarranted, uncharitable assaults. "Again," he thought to himself, "another coward has died before his death."

George Hosea Moore awakened the next morning not completely rested. He had struggled long with his conscience most of the night. He climbed out of bed not having redressed his conscience for having given tantamount approval to Miss Lollie's unwarranted attacks. He dressed, straightened his expensive tie, and opened his room door which had not held back very well the enticing smell of coffee, bacon and eggs, hot biscuits and butter, along with the customary grits. Aunt Callie was up early every morning preparing the habitually heavy southern breakfast. In this particular house, however, her burden was heavier than it would be in other places since she had to prepare

at least three kinds of meat for Uncle Henry Freeman's consumption. George could taste the country ham frying with its sizzling aroma, the country sausage which she had put together with her own rough hands, and the greasy slabs of bacon made a delectable order that could not be resisted even by the staunchest vegetarian. He was greeted by his uncle and aunt as he sat down at the table next to them. He ate his customary heavy amount for breakfast although none could equal Uncle Henry's intake. He had trouble sanctioning Uncle Henry's constant demand on his wife after having emptied an entire platter: "Ah wants moa meat, Callie. Whut ails you anyway. Ah wants moa meat!" Thereupon Aunt Callie, obedient because of habit --she had long since stopped questioning the prudence of Uncle Henry's carnivorous indulgence--rose and procured more well-cooked meat for the next onslaught. They said very few words that morning--Uncle Henry only had time for talking after he had completed his huge enterprise. George excused himself from the daily carnality, went out to the stable, mounted one of the better mules that Uncle Henry kept caring for, and rode off into the distance.

The sun was warm, bright, and triumphant this morning over what few clouds had moved westward. George rode slowly through the woods around Lake Waccamaw seeing, in his poetic tendency, a forest in every autumnal leaf, complete with shapes and changing colors of a North Carolina fall. He was alert to the birds and streams that lent their music to the delicious surroundings. Like most poets, not only was his mind a sphere where in all things outside it are reflected and repeated (the brain of man contains the universe),

it was something more wonderful still.

It might have been accounted an event in the history of Columbus County when George Hosea Moore, after riding by Mr. Lonnie Spaulding's log cabin and forge within seventy yards or so, chanced to meet that morning a country girl walking towards the house. She did not look up and only when he caught an indistinct glimpse of her face did he conclude that this must be the young woman who lived with Mr. Spaulding, who helped to take care of him. George was not so very sure of her relation to Mr. Spaulding since he had heard so many different stories about that area of conjecture. She did speak to him--which is the polite custom of this area--as she walked by. In fact, such manners are invariable customs with the inhabitants of the sequestered areas among the encompassing woods whether meeting strangers or acquaintances. The habits were much more intensified since all in this particular section of Columbus County know that in some distant but important way they are all related in one way or another. Their forefathers had come from far and near, were of all races, and had varied customs which amalgamated here about forty-five miles west of Wilmington, North Carolina, stretching north into Bladen County. They were all ancestrally referred to during the time of slavery as "Free Issues"--a term of complimentary origin to those who believed in the institution of slavery, and a term of self-belittling quality when one considers the entire morality of a basically immoral system.

George lifted his hat in respectful reply with that punctilious courtesy which he had made a point of according to his southern relatives. "You show is raised correct," they would comment from time to time.

"Ah s'pose it comes from a whuppin' now and then," they would conclude thereby giving credibility to their own method of bringing up children. In another moment the thin short woman had passed down the narrow sandy path, overhung with loblollies, three-pointed leaf maples, and deliciously fragrant sweet gum trees. At a deft, even pace, never faltering or hardly slackening as she traversed the precarious log that extended across the rushing, anxious stream--it found Lake Waccamaw to join a short distance away--she quickly made her way through the rest of the woods to her log-hut home.

The expression on her gaunt face, half seen though it was, had attracted the young man's profound attention. He rode along slowly, meditating all the while. "She does live with Mr. Spaulding, after all. I wish I knew what relation they are. I suspect they must be, in spite of Miss Lollie's gossip, father and daughter." At any rate this is the family about whom so much mystery circled.

George rode home, found Uncle Henry Freeman stationed firmly in his wicker chair on the porch nearly half asleep. Uncle Henry heard his nephew tie up his mule and walk up the rickety wood steps of the porch. He raised himself a little, wiped his greasy mouth with his meat-stained handkerchief, rolled his big bright eyes up towards his relative and said, "Well, does you thinks she a perdy chile?"

"I couldn't tell, Uncle Henry, but how did you know I would even see her? I didn't say where I was going."

"Well, Ah knows young folks," Uncle Henry announced, "and you ain't no exception neither. You mahght hab lots of education, but you ain't no diff'rent from the res of urs, down hiar when it comes to findin' a woaman. I jess don't think she the one fur you, Son. Ah

remembers her perdy well, an' she jess ain't perdy. O show 'nough, Ah knows you cain't married some-un 'jess 'cause she perdy," he continued his analysis.

"Well, Uncle Henry, I did not say anything about marrying her or anyone else. I just saw her from the distance really, except when she walked by and said, 'good mornin'."

"Well, Ah's show glad of that. Show glad 'bout that!" Then, as if such news had given him a license to talk freely about the subject at hand, he assailed, "Ah knows she cain't hep it, but she show is a poa country gal." And then he added quickly as if he were afraid of being misunderstood, "Not that thar's any harm in the chile, you undastan'. She's a mahght good, quahte, soft-speakin' gal, an' wouldn't do nobody no harm. But she is whahte-faced, slim and livin' in a sorry house with a sorry drunk. I declare, Ah ain't never seen a man who could overdo a thing lahke Lonnie kin." He forgot--if he was aware of it--that he had just finished a side of beef this past week all by himself. "She done remahnds me of one of them thar ol'd willer trees in the winter winds. I reckon she ain't got much moa tahme to live oan this hiar evil earth. Guess Miss Lollie's preparing fur her funeral all rahght. She does them kahnd's 'er things."

George asked no more questions or, more likely, he entertained no more conversation about the innocent victim of the community's ignorance and, therefore, derision.

Not long afterward, George was hunting deep in the vermillion-colored woods on the north side of Lake Waccamaw. He had chosen the spot because the night before, while looking so happily at the starry

heavens so beautifully complemented by the earth star in spite of its forge origins, he had spied some of the most graceful deer across the lake that he had ever seen in his life. This was the season and he was out for the hunt all by himself. Uncle Henry's horse happened to cast a shoe. He thereupon complimented himself on his proximity--no one will ever know whether his locus was intentional or not--and moved unerringly towards the blacksmith's abode. He thought he would not only get to meet Mr. Lonnie Spaulding's daughter, niece, cousin, or secret wife--he knew not which, although hoping that the latter would not be true--and to get his horse reshod immediately. According to what Miss Lollie and Uncle Henry had told him--and the story had been well trumpeted about the community--there were a half dozen chances that he would never meet up with the drinking blacksmith. As he approached the little cleared area where stood the log-hut and the forge, George could hear the rhythmic vibrations of an anvil. It was faint at first, but as he approached it rang forcefully over the underbrush and through the trees. George completed his ramble through the redolent woods and emerged into an opening which brought him face to face with the poorly constructed log-hut. The sky was so clear and the air so still that the metallic sound penetrated far through the radiant and quiet woods. He walked ahead about fifty yards and saw, as he grew disappointed with the sight, a humble dwelling with a background of primeval woods, purpling in nature's splendor. The chickens, freely prancing, aimlessly picking and giggling, were everywhere about, some roosting in the stunted cedar tree just outside the front door. An old man, feeble and obviously arthritic, was dozing in the lingering sunshine on the only porch chair. A young woman, pale

faced, small light eyes, thin lips, sprawling nose, and a wry smile about her kind, high cheekbones, sat in the window, turned her head and went back into the interior of the rickety log-hut.

The problematic damage to his horse's foot sustained since the accident had to be taken care of. George Hosea Moore's theory that he finally found the origin of the earth star occupied sufficient minutes for self-reflection. So absorbed was his attention that he did not observe until the animal was firmly under the blacksmith's hands, that despite Mr. Lonnie Spaulding's unaccustomed industry, this was by no stretch of fantasy a high point in his habitual dissipation. He trembled --a distinct sign of having been embroiled with the home-made gin bottle's content. Lonnie Spaulding was in that stage of drunkenness which is greatly accented by an elaborate affectation of sobriety. His desire that George should look upon them as a being of sober intention and rational behavior was abundantly manifest in his rigidly steady gait, the preternatural gravity in his bloodshot eyes, his sparingness of speech, and the difficulty with which he enunciated the acquiescent formulae which had constituted his paltry part of the conversation. Now and then, able to control his faculties by something somewhat less than an heroic effort, he looked hard at the sensitively aware George in order to discover what doubts might be expressed in the young man's face concerning the genuineness or spuriousness of his booze deportment. George Hosea Moore, not insensitive to even the prideful needs of the intoxicated, found that it was best to affect, too. The young man believed that the blacksmith's histrionic attempts in the role of sober artist--or artisan--were occupying his superficial, somewhat limited, attention more than the paring of the horse's hoof.

The blacksmith held the hoof between his knees on his dirty leather apron, while the horse danced an animated measure on the other three feet, potential danger. George decided to assume an air of indifference and walked away into the shop. Sometimes disaster can be avoided by lowering the intensity of the scene.

George peered about casually at the various horseshoes hanging on a rod in a rude aperture that served as a window. There were plowshares, scythes, wagon tires, the glowing fire of the forge--the source of all of George's present aesthetic happiness. Contrastingly the dirty forge gave off an unpleasant odor, the air about was close and stifling. The young man soon found himself in the doorway for both relief and escape.

"Is it possible to get some water here?" he asked as Lonnie Spaulding, half staggeringly, reentered and began hammering vigorously at the destined horseshoe.

The resonance from the beat of the hammer on the anvil stopped for a moment. The solemn drunken brown eyes were slowly turned upward towards the visitor's face, struggling to make contact. The elaborate, self-serving affectation of sobriety was again ostensibly apparent in the blacksmith's demeanor. A man can never hope to discover another as long as he remains paralyzed by the fear of being discovered himself. Lonnie Spaulding gave up the search for George's eyes, rolled up his dirty bluish-grayed sleeve more tightly on his hammer-arm, turned back to his work after a nervous twitch and a readjustment of his homespun trousers, and tried to cast upon George another glance replete with a challenge. He fell back to his work with the telling precision of both habit and machinery.

The question, or request as it were, had hardly been registered before forgotten. At the next interval of about half a minute, during which instant thousands of disjointed thoughts raced across George's active mentality, the desire to have some cool water was repeated again.

"Water, you sa-id?" he drawled, looking up again from a squat position this time. He narrowed his eyelids, as if to shut out another contemplation that he had to grapple with, and recommended: "Thar ain't no fresh water hiar, but you kin go over yonder to the house and ask Sobrina, o' ef she ain't thar, she down at the spring fetchin' some good cool water." He shaded his eyes from the high sun with his huge broad blackened right hand. George noted the difference in color between this drunken, skilled blacksmith's natural color and that of his working arm. The latter was as dark as his African ancestors' skins, the former showed signs of that acutely plentiful mixture of blood which American slavery was so instrumental in fostering.

George Hosea Moore took his leave of the blacksmith and headed into the open fields, following the directions given him. The sound of the anvil faded in the distance as a cool gray shadow fell on the gaiting George. He followed a narrow path that grew dank as it wound its way to a dashing spring. Green, odorous water-hoving reeds stretched out before him joined by lumps of fern and pungent mint. George's artistic perception engulfed the soft verdure of the surroundings, which lent itself to a feeling of smiling grace. His eyes fell on the slight girl who stood by the spring, her pail filled, waiting calmly. With an expectant look on her face, she meekly bent her head as if unworthy of the encounter. George thought to himself that no creature could have been more coarsely attired. A yellow cotton

dress faded to the faintest degree, rough, homemade shoes that extended slightly beyond the extent of her long skirts, and a torn man's cap tossed aside on the moss-grown boulders near at hand, completed her humble appearance. George thought of the woman at the well where Christ approached. Then he thought that the wild nature that surrounded her had been generous, although it had played sad tricks on her lot. There were opaline lights in her blue eyes which one sees only in sunset clouds that brood above dark hills. The golden sunbeams, fading now from the luscious landscape, had left a perpetual reflection in her copper-colored hair. George somehow thought that there was a gentle affinity between Miss Sobrina Spaulding and other pliant, fraceful, swaying young things. Although she was hardly more human to George than certain lissome woodland flowers--whose names he could not list if required to do so, he felt that a fine artist could bring her beauty to fulsome glory.

"May I trouble you to give me some water?" he quietly asked. The question was prosaic enough and her smile gave the request grace and meaning. She took the gourd from the pail, dipped it gently into the lucent depths of the spring, handed it to him, and stood aside awaiting its return. George hungrily--thirst for the liquid-craving body is near to that state--drained the cool delicious water. "Much obliged to you," he concluded.

"Welcome, fur show," she replied in a drawling monotone.

George wanted to encourage her to say more, but he realized that the gulf between her station and his was not one that inspired bridging. They stood side by side, George towering over her in education and exposure. They had so little in common that George

could find nothing more to say to her at this moment. He struggled with himself and against the noisy, painful silence that conquered the scene. Out of desperation he asked, "Do you live here?" knowing all the while the answer and feeling embarrassed about proposing the already known for the sake of gaining time.

"Yes," she quickly responded in the same country monotone, "Ah lives hiar close by," as she pointed towards the log cabin. She was too shy to underscore his previous knowledge, for she had seen him from her window as she was sure he had observed her.

She turned to lift the brimming pail as George tried again to strike up a conversation which he felt that he so desperately needed in order to relieve his discomfort. "Do you ever leave home? Do you ever go anywhere?"

Her eyes caught his face with a surprise in them. "No, cain't say that Ah does," she drawled after a pause. "Ah ain't got no whar to call as Ah knows of 'cept fur mah sister's house, but that's all the way up ahead to Clarkton. She used to live in Whitesville, but they done had to move 'cause of all the fussin' and drinkin' and the shootin' and hollerin' in her husban's family. Lawd, they's worsen then my folk's hiar. Cain't say that thar's a thing Ah kin do 'bout it neither." Her monotone rose a pitch or two when talking about the condition of the two families' drinking brawls. She grew a bit selfconscious as if she had spoken too openly to a stranger. Her mood at that moment was melancholy in a sweet way that George understood so tenderly. Good and health people, in harmony with their surroundings, as she was, are both sad and happy there. They do not comprehend their universe, but they love it and can therefore bear it. She quickly moved

on up the path, gracefully putting distance between herself and her newly acquired acquaintance.

Nevertheless, George had been romantically touched by this delightfully crude wood-flower. It seemed cruel that so fine a creature of this nature should be wasted here, unseen by more appreciative eyes than those of possums, birds, rabbits, snakes and others less than human. It all gave him a baffling sense of the mystery that goes contiguously with the injustice--so keenly reflected on the gigantic ocean that surged between their lives.

George followed her path at a noticeable distance, entered the blacksmith's shop, mounted his horse and rode off quickly to Uncle Henry's home. He thought he could ride by the spot on the other side of the lake. He would be there in time to see the earth star come up this night. He hardly knew what his experience would be after finding out that earth star's crude origins.

This night at dinner Uncle Henry was overflowing with questions, but George held his distance answering sparingly, cautiously. He had already learned the undergrowth of opinions and conjectures that wound in and out of close-living communities. The strain of saying very little in the middle of such a warm and generous community that Uncle Henry and Aunt Callie provided was most demanding. George knew, however, that to betray Sobrina Spaulding and her wayward father, Lonnie Spaulding, now that he knew so much about them was to introduce only more condemnation and scorn. It would be to permit more of the disease of calumny from fundamentally good people like his uncle and aunt. After all, they were operating, unfortunately from both ignorance and its mate credulity, in hearsay.

"Did you git to see that thar skinny little gal?" asked Uncle Henry with a remainder of the chicken thigh bone in his mouth. "Is she a little tech in the haid?" he asked as he wiped the grease from this expansive chin. "Ah jess know'd you be gittin' over thar. Satisfiahde, Son?"

"Yes, I am, Uncle Henry," George boldly asserted. "They really aren't as bad as you folks seem to think. Oh yes, there's a lot of drinking, that's true. They're not much on education, but that's nothing to hold against folks. There are a lot of uneducated people among our kith and kin," George announced. "Miss Sobrina Spaulding is a good young woman. She has not had a chance with that group around her. Of course, she is crude, but she sure is pretty," George said as he smiled in the approval of his memory of her. "Of course, like all alcoholics, Mr. Lonnie is helpless. He hardly manages, but I don't think that he thinks that he has much to live for, Uncle Henry and Aunt Callie. I don't know what to say to him, because in a very real sense, he hasn't much to live for. Drinking too much is an escape from the humdrum madness of life. I don't know the whole story about him, but it does not matter. I am not so sure that I want to hear it since I can figure out its destiny myself. There has been too much hearsay, rumor, and vicious gossip about those people. That dear young girl is the victim of too little attention, no education, and total scorn because she is not stupid, just quiet because she has accepted what little life has offered her.

Uncle Henry leaned back, rolled his big blue eyes, smiled approvingly--more because of the beautiful voice, speech and delivery than its contents--and said aside, "Callie, Ah wants some moa meat.

Lawd hab mercy, you never learns 'bout how much to serve. That thar smoke house's full with meat and you jess gits out a little bit at a tahme."

"Henry, you's wrong, honey. Ah usually says nothin' 'bout yo habits, but you's gowina dahe some day derectly 'cause you eats jess too much meat. Ah swanee, Henry, its a disgrace befoa the Lawd. Lawd hab mercy, we eats moa meat in this hiar house then the res of the county eats in a lahfe tahme together. Henry you's jess makin' a hoag out'n yoaself."

George totally agreed but said nothing although he was delighted to see his aunt assert herself in the cause of right doing. He was also delighted because it relieved the tensions that were building due to the persistent questions about the Spauldings on the other side of Lake Waccamaw.

George say Miss Sobrina Spaulding only twice more; he spoke to her directly only once more and that was brief. He sometimes stopped, in order to talk to Miss Spaulding, but ended up talking to her grandfather, Jeremiah Spaulding, who seemed to have found a permanent resting place on the old log cabin porch. By this time George had rescued the intricate relationships among the delicate family structure of the Spauldings. They were of the clan of Spaulding but because they were less fortunate--some said because their coloring was of a darker hue--they were considered as another set of Spauldings. It was unlikely that they were--everyone hereabout knew that--it was simply that their lowly state of birth, mind, and education--to say nothing of class--had to be sufficiently explained away.

George Hosea Moore piqued himself upon the readiness with which

he became interested in these people on the other side of Lake Waccamaw, the way he entered into their lives, obtained a most comprehensive awareness of the machinery and haphazard manner of living in this wilderness. He found it far more complicated than one could readily believe, as he looked upon the changeless face of the wide expanses of fields, woods, swamps, and lakes of Columbus County--land of a most distinct and seemingly close-knit people. They all appealed to him from the common basis of their humanity and the pleasure of watching the development of their common human attributes in this primitive, yet advanced state of society. George learned to scorn the very scorn cast down upon these people, probably his instant and distant ancestors. He became impatient with the displeasure and annoyance of those without sufficient sensibility to recognize the distinctness of their social ingenuity and cultural aberrations at the same time. George was delighted by the nobility of these singularly proud country folks--a people that found joy in working, pleasure in neighborliness, and sobriety in going to church when it was convenient and deemed necessary. Because of their sharp and narrow prejudices, their educational poverty, their puritannical bent towards aesthetics, their uncouth dress, homespun appearances and their distinct speech, George entertained himself with his broader view because he thought he understood them. After all, was he not only one step removed from their soil-sooted, bible-glutted existence? He had not even a subacute notion that he himself looked upon these people--his relatives--and their inner lives only as picturesque bits of the mental and moral landscape which surrounded them. It was an aesthetic, theoretical, and social pleasure that contemplating on them brought his intellect and heart. He considered

himself as far as ever from their common humanity. He was both sorry and glad about these extensions and diversities.

The weeks rolled on deep into November's share of autumn. George had announced to Uncle Henry and to Aunt Callie his intention to go hom by Thanksgiving. There was much to do there, school was waiting, and Mother had expected him before this time. Uncle Henry asked him to stay--and that was sincere and expected. so thorough is southern hospitality--but George declined his uncle's generosity and made preparations to move northward again.

It was near dusk on a dull chilly North Carolina evening. George Hosea Moore dismounted in front of the door of Lonnie Spaulding's log cabin. The old sweet gum tree stretched out desolate and bare on the eaves of the forge. The stream rushed by in swift gray whirlpools. Grim branches of the denuded woods rustled here and there, and the North Carolina air was sweet with fall scents but chilly with the onrush of winter. Far away nature stretched in parallel lines, rising tier above tier, and showing numerable gradations of a dreary neutral tint, growing ever fainter in the distance, till merged in the uniform tone of the somber and horizontal sky.

For a change, indoors in this part of the country was more cheerful. Sweet smelling logs, along with hickory branches, dispensed both warmth and light alike. The musical whirr of a spinning-wheel added its unique charm to the homespon atmosphere of sound and sense. Strings of bright red pepper-pods, ears of corn, shanks of meat, and hanks of woolen and cotton yarn hung from the crude rafters. Gourds of seeds and medicinal herbs were placed here and there in the little interior to provide for next year's plantings. On rude shelves against

the wall dangled cooking utensils, drinking vessels, basins, tubs, and platters, all distinguished by that scrupulous cleanliness which is not only a sign of godliness among the humble of this culture but also a mark of distinction between country folks and city dwellers. The rush-bottom chairs drawn in a semi-circle before the rough and poorly adjusted stones which did their duty as a hearth, were occupied by several shabbily-dressed men who seemed to pay a prolonged visit to the blacksmith and his daughter. Several members of the family were sufficiently diverted as they sat on an assortment of inverted domestic articles, such as washtubs, large tin basins, crates, and baskets made of thick Slap Swamp reeds. Among Lonnie Spaulding's friends was a large flat bottle, playfully denominated by "Jay-cups" in honor of Flop Jacobs who made it in his cellar and who never drank it anywhere under any occasion. The bottle was readily emptied and as readily replenished from a huge keg that stood invitingly in the corner. The keg, like the forge, was never free from fire, that keg was never empty. The fact that the Jacob's house was never far off suggested a sound reason for this container's continuous filling. The effects of this spirit-lifting solution were beginning to be distinctly visible.

Miss Sobrina Spaulding, in all of her delicacy, seemed to be for into though incongruous with the brutal and unkept surroundings with these unfortunate conditions of her life. She stood at a long distance from the group, quietly, meditatively, innocently spinning at her wheel. George in his often misdirected concern for others suddenly felt a pity for her when he glanced in the direction of her obvious separation. Suddenly, he had forgotten his condescending attitude in his interest in her crafty work. It was at variance with

the ideas he had hitherto entertained and maintained about that humble handicraft. There came across him an ambiguous memory from the city life that he knew so well, the peasant girls of art galleries and of ballads, about girls spinning golden flax--like their hair--as they danced their gracious steps on the footpedals of the romantic spinning wheel. George thought that he had never seen attitudes so charming as Sobrina Spaulding's this night.

With the characteristic hospitality of country folk, Lonnie Spaulding immediately offered George Moore a rush-bottom chair upon his entrance into the fold. Although these are humble people, theirs is a huge pride that goes with that kind of hospitality that encounters a stranger on the threshold of every hut or cabin, or house for that matter, pressing upon that guest ungrudgingly its best. That same hospitality follows the stranger with protestations of regret and apology for having so little to offer.

George was more or less known to all of the visitors and, after all, under the sense of familiarity and the thrusting impetus of homemade spirits, the unregulated chorale of conversations rose and fell, began again as freely as before his entrance. It was more hostile and antagonistic to his principles and prejudices than anything he had hitherto heard among these people. "Perhaps, this is the side of them that Miss Lollie Freeman knew," he thought. "But," he replied to himself, "how would she know? O well, perhaps it all has been reported to her over the years since so many of them were avid churchgoers at Miss Lollie's temple."

George looked on and listened most attentively to this new type of gathering--at least it was new to him. Uncle Henry, Aunt Callie,

and Miss Lollie told him that he would encounter this kind of ribaldry if he "wint down yonder 'nough tahmes. They's sorry folks, show is," were the usual antiphonal statements of contempt from that removed group. George was glad to be welcomed, happy to remain delighted to be a part--although a distant part at that--of this society which had impressed his cultivated perceptions. The violence, the lawlessness of the conversation, the threats of vehemence seemed to have no reality for George. If he thought about the proposals and wide ranging hatreds set before him at all, he had an optimistic, reassuring feeling that the desired intentions could not be carried out since the group was beyond reason. They were close to those varying stages of stupor that people reach when encouraging themselves in a group. Nevertheless, George glanced now and then--unnoticed by the others--at the lovely young Miss Spaulding, loathe that she should hear the like of this virulent angry bitterness. "It will startle that innocence far too severely," he concluded.

Miss Spaulding was obvioulsy listening to the same turbulence. Her mulatto face, however, was calm, undisturbed as though she had become a veteran of such situations. Indeed, as George surmised, she had witnessed many of these mass drinking bouts.

"Them thar Mitchells oughtn't to live much longer!" exclaimed Abraham Spaulding, the brother of Lonnie. He was a gaunt, balding man from the rear of long head, clad in brown, blood-stained jeans. His knife was suspended from the rope he used instead of a belt. His gun, like those of the other visitors, stood high against the wall in a corner of the room. "They show oughtn't to be let live hiar in Columbus County, in Bladen County or anywhar else. Ah'd take

ciar of them thar scoundrels all bah mahself fur nothin' moa then another drink," he slurped through his booze.

"Well thin, hiar's 'nother drink, Abe," said Rob Webb trusting another bottle into the larger man's hands. "Go to it 'cause Ah agrees."

"That thar show is a true word an' a good mayon to say it and a better mayon to do it," encouraged Lonnie Spaulding practically on his knees from the rapid intake of cheap liquor. "They oughter be run down and thin kilt-all three of them thar Mitchells."

George could not resist a question, for he was ever alert to add to his warehouse of knowledge about men and women in general and about his origins here in Columbus County in particular, "Who are the Mitchells, if I may ask?" as he turned to the older Abraham Spaulding.

"Who are the Mitchells?" shouted Abe, making a point of seizing the question. "Why, thar the meanness an' the sorriess folks in this hiar area. Ah'd prefer to deal with copperhairs over thar in Slap Swamp. They's terble folks an' you's gotta hate um," snarled the drunk Abe Spaulding.

"Show 'nought," shouted Lonnie, "they oughter be kilt oan the spot. Eny mayon lahke that thar Booker Mitchell, that dad-burn son of a bitch that'd treat his wahfe lahke he does, oughta be kilt rahght now. That thar woaman's mah sister Bonnie an' Pete Campbell's cousin," as he pointed at the half asleep Mr. Campbell. He reached over and shook the half-dazed relative, and shouted in his ear, "You was with me, Ham (that was Campbell's nickname because of his corpulence) when Ah trahde to shoot Booker Mitchell's dern haid off in the doa lass yiar. Ah shot to kill him, but somehow Ah was shaky that day. Mah sister

screamed and hollered so ba-id, Ah stopped. Show 'nough, he got 'way that thar tahme. Show 'nough, he wuz laid up near 'bout foa months. Ah'll git him fur show the nex' tahme an' that thar tahme ain't fur off, neither." His threat fell off into repeated name calling which tapered off into a drunken mumbling.

"Don't you think it would be better to persuade your sister to leave Mr. Mitchell?" suggested George. He did not intend to play the moderator. He merely wanted to lessen the intensity of the seething hatred.

Lonnie growled, leaned back as if to catch a bit of sobriety, swore another fierce oath, and then was silent.

Noll Jacobs stood up on the other side of the room and exclaimed with his large black fist in the air, "Thars whar the real trouble's, she won't leave him. Ah cain't understan' it either. She 'mits he beats her awful when he's drunk, but she say he's mahghty nahce to her when he's sober. Don't understan' that fur the lahfe of me." He sat down in his passion and continued statements about his lack of comprehension.

This manner of cutting the Gordian knot of domestic difficulties might have proved efficacious but for the insecurity--perhaps shakiness --induced by the thrill of fraternal senticment, the infusion and overuse of rot-gut booze, the protest of the bone of contention, the deep-seated guilt-laden oedipal hatred, the presence of the guns in the corner against the wall.

Abe Spaulding leaned forward and cried out with drunk vengeance in his voice, "He won't git rid of urs so easy the nex tahme, be show o' that. We mahghtin' to let him off but fur what happen las week. Show was a shame, show wuz and we's gotta git him this hiar tahme."

George was overwhelmed by curiosity--a sign of his intelligence--to know what had come to pass last week. He did not, however, feel justified in asking more questions. He feared that the consequences would be horrible. But cheap fire water is a potent tongue-loosener, and the unusual communicativeness of the silent and stolid folks of this area attested its strength in this regard. Without a word of enquiry, Lonnie Spaulding enlightened George. "You see, mah brother hiar, thought that seein' he could git that thar woaman, our sister, to come to his house he could shoot that thar ol' Mitchell critter without botherin' her, an' thin things'ud git better and easy agin. Well, he went up thar when all them Mitchells was gone over to Elizabeth Town fur som-un, and he--that thar Mitchell critter, 'scaped death. Mah sister never come that thar day, neither. His ol' confunded brothers wint off with him and that done that. Well, that thar day mah sister into out to the spring to wash some clothes and only the chillun come home, leavin' the drunken bums drinkin' some distance away in Elizabeth Town. Well, we done put the chillen to aid and we sit fahre to the house. That thar woaman, mah sister, gits thar rahght quick lahke a cat takin' ciar of its young. But she couldn't do a dad-blame thing. Bah the tahem she di-id git thar the house was nothin' but ashes. It's nothin' but ol' wood and branches of pahne trees. Well, we jess ain't finish the job. We tinds to go oan up thar to Clarkton tonahgt and finish the ress of them thar Mitchells off. It show is sad we ain't finish the job lass week. It show is awful to wais' tahem lahke that. No Spaulding lahkes to leave a job undone, fur show."

"Show 'nough," replied Lonnie, "that thar wife of hissen, our sister, 's the real trouble. She's jess too good to him and everybody

else. She's jess lahke her mother was, kind and sweet to eveybody in the worl'. We knows he a tryin' to git her off after the loss of them thar horrible chillen was goan. They wants to git off to Tennessee. They knows thar in danger." He tried to reflect a bit and then remembered. "They's gowin' to be goane by noon tomorrow. We jess muss take ciar of them tonahght."

"They'll never start to Tennessee tomorra," chimed in Abe Spaulding. "They'll be in hell fahres fur that tahme," he added with more venom than ever. He turned to his brother for consolation and said, "Ef only Ah could git her way from that thar man, but she show loves him. Well, we wuz all thar together, fur show. Well, Lonnie took out his gun and aimed, but that thar dumb sister of ours run rahght between urs and the ol' baster Mitchell. She dahed, of course, and now he still lives. He's done gotta go now 'cause she done took the shot fur him. In other words, he done kilt our sister."

George was shocked by the decline in logic and therefore looked frighteningly at both brothers whose violence had surpassed all treachery that George Hosea Moore had ever imagined. For years, their sister had stood between her brothers on the one hand and the man she married on the other. She had held back her brothers from their vengeance of her wrongs by the most subtle influence which shook their aim. She had gone into exile. Her wrongs were supplemented by deep and irreparable injuries to her brothers. And now the curious mortal distortions of these men--that powerful and now uncontrollable feeling--that alternately nerved and weakened their hands hod gotten out of hand.

The booze flowed more freely, the threats grew more intense, the atmosphere burned with that kind of hatred that only finds its

consequence in either immediate physical violence or in a drunken slumber of oblivion. The latter did not seem likely to George. He grew nervous about what course ought to be his next action. A sense of responsibility was ever at the brink of his sensitive soul.

"We's goin'a be thar at Hallsboro by 'bout two this hiar moanin'," shouted Lonnie. "We show is an' by sunrahse there ain't gwoin' a be none of them thar Mitchell's left 'cept mah sister who's damn it enyway, a Spaulding. She kin come and live hiar with urs down below whar folks is folks and not damn drunkers." The irony of his state against the backdrop of his belligerent accusations was unnoticed by all except George.

There was a protest from an unexpected source. It was not based upon hypocrisy, or subtle irony. It had its roots in human decency. The whirr of the spinning-wheel came to a sudden halt. "Ah don't see no since," demanded Sobrina Spaulding in a firm monotone, "in this hiar nonsince 'bout killin' folks." Her voice became vibrant, "Lawd knows yall s'posed to know better than that. Ain't Miss Lollie said so in church? Thar ain't no since in shootin' folks down lahke they was nothin'. Don't the Bahble say that you ain't s'posed to kill folks? Yall ought know better than that. Ah's shamed of you. Ah show is!"

George looked around at her as her opaline eyes were radiant with annoyance and disappointment. He was proud of her natural sense of humanity.

"Brina, shet yoa mouth, shet yoa mouth rahght hiar and now," demanded her father taken aback in his semi-conscious state. "You's got no business buttin' in hiar. Ain't no mentionin' Miss Lollie Freeman now. She ain't hiar, besahdes sometahmes you's gotta take

things in yoa own han's. You's a woman and you ain't got no say in this hiar plan with urs folks. Jess spin some moa cloth, Ah needs a new jacket." Lonnie Spaulding was not aware of the young woman's profundity nor of her strength of character. He had lived with her for so many years, taken her for granted as a kind daughter and unmarried servant that he had never developed any respect for her. Indeed, at this moment, George noticed--or concluded--that although innocently accomplished, he was the main cause of her life's angle at this moment and probably his influence would forever be negative upon this beautifully simple life. Surprisingly--perhaps thankfully--she was fundamentally saintly and her father's abuse, misude, and neglect had added immeasurably to her state of pure goodness.

"Ah jess thinks its awful that yall would even think of killin' another critter oan this hiar earth who's a mayon o' a woaman. Yall show should know better then that. Jess wait till Miss Lollie knows 'bout it!" she continued in her scandalized opposition.

"Brina, jess shet up, shet up rahght now, rahght now! Ah's tahred of hiaring yoa mouth runnin' lahke that!" shouted Lonnie Spaulding having lost his initial surprise at her intrusion. He piqued with anger.

"Ah knows that they ain't done rahght, but Lawd knows we's all done wrong at tahmes. Ah knows that thar drinkin' is jess terble an' it kin kill you, but show 'nough, they's got the rahght to live, jess lahke you an' me, Papa, jess lahke you an' me." She was firmer now. She stood up, crossed the room to her father, picked up the bottle, and in spite of her aversion to that bottle's contents and to what it did to its drinkers, she put it to his lips and said coaxingly,

"Papa, you jess ain't haid half 'nough fur you."

George's eyes filled with the tears that often go with seeing the cause of justice served even though the means of accomplishing that end are dubious. He felt inferior to Sobrina Spaulding, suddenly, and it felt good all over. He was disposed to recant his estimate of her high nature when twice afterward she stopped her work, defiantly offered opposition on both personal and moral grounds, refilled her father's bottle, and in effect commanded the scene.

Lonnie Spaulding fell into a deep stupor. George left the little log cabin as the others began to brew their hatred again with as much intensity as before. He closed the little door behind him without anyone noticing his departure, for the bottle was traveling the circle of guests and relatives with more speed than their ominous threats of murder, hatred, and contempt. They were as David spoke of Saul in the Psalms, ravening lions.

George Hosea Moore felt relief as he rode off towards his Uncle Henry's home. He had noticed the horses of Mr. Lonnie Spaulding's friends and relatives standing patiently partly within and partly without the drunk blacksmith's shop. The anvil still gave off its enchanting altered light. They would stand there all night, he thought and there boded little harm for the maligned Mitchells up in Hallsboro. He was delighted about that.

He dashed home quickly, for the night was becoming ugly. The winds blew colder and colder and a heavy rain came up from the east bringing Atlantic moisture and promises of a few unpleasant days. He thought of the bright skies that had charmed him just a short while ago, of the stars that peeped out of the dark open heavens only to be

surpassed by the captivating brilliance and glitter of the earth star that came from across Lake Waccamaw. The forge was glowing now. Miss Spaulding was spinning the wheel, and alas, yes, they were all drinking heavily underneath that star. He entered his uncle's home, sighed with relief and went straight to bed since they had retired.

Days later George slept through Uncle Henry Freeman's customary protein breakfast of chicken, bacon, country ham, eggs, grits and four cups of coffee. He awoke only to hear Miss Lollie's drawling voice in the distance. She had obviously come by to deliver some juicy news about someone. He heard Lonnie Spaulding's name mentioned and immediately concluded that she was reporting to Uncle Henry and to Aunt Callie about his being at that drinking bout a few nights ago. However, George was determined to wait this one out. He picked up one of his several theology texts and distracted himself by reading over a chapter on God's mercy and His justice. A short time went by and he heard Miss Lollie's buggy move on. She obviously had to trumpet the news in other parts of the community. No longer able to resist the temptation of knowing exactly what was said, he dressed quickly, washed out of the little basin of water Aunt Callie always provided his room with the night before, and appeared.

Aunt Callie and Uncle Henry greeted him warmly as usual, and he sat at the large oval table. Aunt Callie rushed into the kitchen, brought out the coffee and the rest of the meat for Uncle Henry's consumption. She knew her men's habits. Nothing was said for a while until Uncle Henry spoke. George had determined not to introduce the subject.

"Well, Son," he said, chewing a large slab of country ham at its

edge--the grease slid down his boxy chin--"Miss Lollie was bay jess a whahle ago."

"Yes," offered George, "I heard her. I can just about tell you what she said about my being over there with Lonnie Spaulding and his family. They were really drunk, Uncle Henry, really drunk. They were getting violent, too, because they all wanted to go up to Hallsboro and kill their in-laws, the Mitchells."

"Well, Son," said Uncle Henry somewhat paternally, "Ah knows you wasn't drinkin' but they show had a tahme of it. They show di-id. One of them thar folks got so drunk that done burnt down the house and everything done got caught oan fahre. The hoases got loose an' ran wahle through the woods. Even the shop coat oan fahre, Son, and cain't tell how done happen."

"My! my! how terrible!" exclaimed George."

"Well, Son, that ain't all. Fur it done happen that thar young girl with no since wint out in the road and rayoned, and rode a hoase and crawled, 'cuase the hoase done throw 'er, an' then rayon some moa all the way to Hallsboro to warn them thar Mitchells up thar 'bout what was gwain' to happen to them. Well, Son, they warn't thar whin she got thar, but now she very very sick, they tellin' all 'bout these parts. Maybe, Son, you warn't so dumb after all. Maybe she knowd whut was gwain' a happen to that thar house. Show hopes they don't 'cuse her of burnin' it down."

"Well, you don't suppose that would happen," said George even more deeply moved by the young woman's selflessness. "She had nothing to gain by that act, Uncle Henry." George asserted. "She was sacrificing everything for the sake of goodness, mercy, and love, Uncle Henry. I was

there and I know the truth. I do not know what Miss Lollie said, but it was one of the most unselfish acts I have ever seen in my life."

"Callie, Ah wonts some moa meat," Uncle Henry demanded as he prepared to respond to his nephew. Aunt Callie obeyed and there was a large platter of fried chicken in front of her husband in short order. "Ah thinks you's rahght, Hosea, Ah thinks you's rahght. You's good a mahne to git to know folks. Poa thing she's got nobody now 'cept her sister who she wnt to warn and now they don't know whar she is. Show hope they fines her. Don't pay no 'tention to Miss Lollie, she show has got some fun'ral sermons to preach. She'll git her money. Lawd, that woaman show loves money and gossip."

George reflected over and over again and wondered about not only this young woman's future but about the extent to which human noble sacrifice could extend itself. A sense of deep humiliation fell upon him. Miss Spaulding had heard no more of that momentous conversation than he. Clearly, a wide contrast had been suggested. Her sense of duty and self-sacrifice was far keener than his self-serving estimation that all would be well in the morning. He thought himself very much like the drunk who goes to bed hoping that the next day will bring a finer day than the one he had drunk away, who sows in tears and hopes to "reap in joy." He began to have a glimmering perception that all his culture, his sensibility, his desired ministry, his sensitivity, his yearning towards humanity, he was not so high in the scale of being. He had a great deal of growth ahead of him. He had entertained false estimates of himself once again because of pride and arrogance. He had loved this young woman--at least he thought he had. What he had truly done was to look down on her with a mingling of

pity for her dense ignorance and low life and a dilettante's delight in picturesque effects. He had profoundly appreciated the beauty about him but had not truly plunged to the depths of the moral splendors of that star over Lake Waccamaw. He also learned after he had tried to see her once more before he left--he failed because she was no where to be found by the time his Seaborad express went North--that fine feelings are of most avail as the motive power of fine deeds for fellowmen.

Two weeks later George's mother read a note she had just received from Uncle Henry Freeman and Aunt Callie.

"Dear Sis, just a couple of lines to tell you that everyone is fine down here now. We did enjoy Hosea's stay with us. Do give him the news that Miss Lollie's Temple sure has had lots of funerals these days. All those folks killed in that horrible fire belonged to her church. They say she really preached up a storm over there. O yes, tell Hosea he was kind of sweet on the poor thing, that Miss Sobrina Spaulding was found outside in Hallsboro shortly after he left. She was taken to the hospital over at Elizabeth town. Well, she died of pneumonia, or something like that. Poor thing she had no one in the world except a sister who married one of those terrible Mitchells from up ahead. O yes, tell him too that we are looking forward to his coming again soon. That darn old forge is gone, too."

George Hosea Moore heard no more of the letter. George never forgot for the rest of his life the look that he saw on the singularly beautiful young woman as he turned away from her and left her for the last time. His heart was profoundly sore as he moved away from his

Louis D. Mitchell

49

mother's company, knowing that when he returned to Columbus County again in the near future he would not see that gloriously and beautifully radiant star over Lake Waccamaw ever again.
