

## MATILDA'S LAST THANKSGIVING STAND

by Louis Mitchell

People said, with the infalliable tone of prophecy that is customary in gossip in Columbus County, where gossip is one of the chief recreations, that if Todd Spaulding had not been able to get that annuity of his he would have fallen on hard times and ended up in the poor house. This couldn't have been quite true, of course, since Columbus County was much too poor to afford a poor house. In fact, in his lifetime Todd Spaulding had sometimes seen folks who had had bad luck and had had no place to go; so, in spite of the unstinting, flickering talk, once he got his annuity, he decided he'd share it with those who were in need of a place to stay. That was the purpose of Todd Spaulding's Farm.

No matter what you were, who you were, or where you came from, you were always welcome at Todd Spaulding's Farm. It was an estate just up ahead, not too far from ol' Uncle Israel Moore's place, the track of land with the most rickety house in the entire country. This time-battered domicile never closed its doors on anyone -- or on any thing either. Take, for example, the Farmers' Union Schoolhouse clock. For more than thirty years it had witnessed the passing of several generations of pupils. For twenty of these years it had succeeded in smiling down on them from the old crumbling wall of the assembly hall. For the last ten years or so, the old clock had grunted away its time from the cafeteria's smoke-stained wall across the road. This clock seemed like an old man -- worrying about its present infirmities and recalling the worful experiences of the past -- woeful in that

they were now merely sweet nostalgia. And, one day, like most things in motion, it seemed to have come to its earthly end. Its ticking was more pronounced, as if it were breathing heavily, when, finally, there came a wheeze from its inner chambers that sounded like a sigh, and then there was a silence. It had apparently ticked for the last time; age had caught up with it.

As if given a wake, it was gently removed from the wall and placed on a table for two days of exhibition. Finally, it was in a funeral procession when Todd Spaulding appeared in town.

"You're not going to throw that good clock away?" Spaulding asked the schoolhouse board of trustees who were acting as pallbearers, carrying the big clock to the junkyard.

"Well...guess we'll have to," replied one of the trustees. "Ah've wound it up tahght, put 'most a half pint of kerosene in it, and shook it till Ah was jest about dizzy in the head, and it jest won't tick a little bit. Guess the ole thing's jest done give out."

"Yassir, things are really changing around old Farmers' Union," whimpered another trustee. "Sho nuff, things are changing."

"Now, see here," said Todd, with a quickness of mind surprising in a man of his simplicity, "you jest let me have a try at it. Let me take it home for a spell."

"For that matter, we'll give it to you for keeps," replied the first trustee. "It ain't worth half a damn anyhow."



We bought another one for the schoolhouse."

And so, a day or two later one could observe the old clock ticking away as soberly as it had ever ticked; however, it peeled away the hours from Todd Spaulding's kitchen wall, now. Perhaps it was revitalized by the new location and a warmer home. Yet, when anyone asked, Todd Spaulding explained, "Ah took it home and boiled it in potash, and there it is, as good as it was thirty years ago." He lifted his otherwise stooped shoulders with contentment. "Yassir, nothin' like old time methods," he snorted, "sho ain't."

However, the old clock was not quite like new; enough enamel was gone from the face to make the exact location of the hour an uncertainty; there were even days when the hour hand needed a little human assistance. Besides, the heat from Todd Spaulding's poorly ventilated wood-stove made the old clock grumble about the excessive smoke. Its complaints, though unheralded, were not without justification, for it aged more rapidly now than at any time before, with the settlement of layer upon layer of soot showing its age like the successive rings in the trunk of an old chestnut tree.

Todd Spaulding, in his usual casual manner, excused the clock's deformed existence with a wave of the hand and a quick declaration of confidence: "It wouldn't be much of a job to reach up once an hour and send the hand along one space. Besides, it would give Aunt Minnie something to look forward to."

Now, it must be told that Aunt Minnie was a very much respected member of this household. She was the first ex-slave

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to live at Todd Spaulding's Farm. She was passing this place on her way north, being given a lift part-way by her former overseer, a much younger man who had grown fond of her. They had stopped at the farm for water, and when Todd had heard her story he asked the former overseer to leave Aunt Minnie with him. She would be the first person to benefit from his annuity.

"Are you sure that you can take care of her?" asked the ex-overseer carefully, doubtfully.

"Sho can!" Todd replied. "Of course Ah'm sho." (He thought quickly to himself, "Don't Ah get four hundred dollars every three months? Ah could take care of an army with that much money!")

"He's a good fellow, that Todd Spaulding," mused the overseer as he drove away, "but I don't recollect that I ever heard before of his having any money. It don't seem possible. Don't know what this country's coming to, jest don't know. Oh well, he's a free issue." He drove on out of sight, still bemused.

Pretty soon, the news of the legacy was common property. Flickering, flapping tongues had taken the information into custody and set it in motion, bounding from mouth to ear and then onward. Aunt Minnie played a large part in spreading the gossip, for by now she was a permanent guest at the farm. She promised to stay with Todd forever. Her gratitude knew no bounds and she managed to keep the house as well as she could. Todd came to enjoy her companionship, in spite of the habit she had of chewing tobacco on one side of her mouth and dipping



snuff on the other. In fact, in time she became Todd's third wife--the first two having died of tuberculosis and in childbirth, respectively. Some folks about claimed that Todd, who before he got his annuity was pretty shiftless, had driven his wives mad with worry and that they took refuge in the grave. But Aunt Minnie was of a sterner breed. Though she was old, she was a good cook, and she could still make a slap at cleaning. As for the clock, she tended it with religious devotion, prompting the preacher to remark that Aunt Minnie spent more time watching that old clock than she did in church.

Then, another guest who settled down permanently, was Inventor Freeman, who had gotten that name throughout Columbus County because it was known that he had invented a new kind of incubator, which worked with wonderful success until the day when the chickens were to come out. Instead, it took fire from too much heat and burned itself into extinction, including in its departure from reality, the chickens, the barn, the farmhouse, and all the furniture, leaving the Inventor, old Uncle Henry Freeman's son, standing in the middle of the field, thinly clad and bare-headed, watching his family home turn to ashes before his eyes.

Having no place to go, he showed up presently at Todd Spaulding's Farm, where he dwelt henceforth, spending most of his time in further incubator experiments. Todd loaned him the money to buy what equipment he could find, but drew the line when Inventor Freeman wanted to make his experiments in the barn. Practical for once, Todd convinced the Inventor to

keep his machinery in a little shed behind the barn, for fear of fire, something which the Inventor assured him would never take place.

Sure enough, when Inventor Freeman had assembled his second incubator, it was as ill-fated as the first, only this time the fire occurred during the night and, by the time the household had been aroused, the barn had caught fire. The Hallsborough Fire Department--one mule and one buggy, driven by one-legged Oscar Mitchell--came in time to save the barn, though it was severely damaged, eating a fine big hole in Todd's annuity for months to come. All that he had to show for his generosity to Inventor Freeman was Matilda. The Inventor had put a turkey egg in with a previous batch and, though he had been unable to hatch one chicken, the turkey's egg had hatched; and this turned out to be the newest of Todd Spaulding's non-paying guests.

Matilda was a big hen by the time of the fire, and the years only seemed to add to her orneriness. The oldest and most venerable school teacher at Farmers' Union had often said in her cultured tones--having spent one summer taking courses at Shaw University--that Matilda should have been named Lucretia for her hand was against all men. Though Aunt Minnie put feed out for her, Matilda lived a free life and was never shut up in a pen. She took care of herself and lived a life wandering around Todd's barnyard and fields. As mascot of Todd Spaulding's Farm, she strutted about knowing her own will and practicing her civil rights. Never in her life had Matilda been hampered by



the cross of timidity. "Dat ole bird," Aunt Minnie often said, "has got a mind of its own. She's got so much sense that I'm sho that her father must of been one of them wild turkeys."

Last of the residents to come to the Farm was old Fisherman Moore, who was named after what had been his profession and his hobby and the great love of his life--fishing. **He knew all the creeks, ponds and rivers in Columbus County.** He even had made trips to the sea. He was very old now and myopia had firmly set in. He no longer had the strength to go to Lake Waccamaw; and, though there was a pond on the Spaulding land, he sometimes didn't have the energy to walk to that either. Yet, this was not enough to keep him from starting out every day with his reel and rod, with an excited heart. Todd had provided him with a brand-new outfit. Sometimes he would sit on a log in the sun, joint his rod **together, and with the rich green grass of the pasture looking deceptively like the Columbus County swamp, he would fish in the dry** pasture with perfect contentment. Though it must be admitted that he caught next to nothing even when he fished in the pond, it was he who caught the obdurate Matilda and made the Thanksgiving Day dinner possible.

Now, the new barn-work had put a large dent into Todd's annuity, and it was decided that the time had come to catch Matilda and eat her, putting sentiment aside. To catch her was the problem, and it turned out to be a larger problem than Todd and his friends realized. Inventor Freeman assured Todd

that there would be no trouble, since he had been working on some traps of his own invention that were foolproof; but when they were placed he merely succeeded in catching everything and everyone else, until Aunt Minnie demanded he take his ropes and pens and rabbit traps out of the barnyard where they were getting in her way. As Thanksgiving got closer, Todd tried on a number of occasions to catch Matilda, each time more fruitless than the last. He would chase Matilda cunningly, then frantically, but, as he said, "Ah mahght as well been chasin' a shootin' star." The turkey scorned him, grew craftier, and seemed to become wilder, tougher, and more determined not to be bothered.

Things had reached a critical point; traps and strategies had not worked. The day before Thanksgiving arrived and still Matilda defied her would-be captors. Two hunters were called in from Whiteville, friends of Todd Spaulding's; but Matilda knew her art and rose to the occasion. Every shot they fired was a waste and, when Matilda had vanished into the underbrush, they gave up.

It was a beautiful Indian Summer Day and, in the afternoon, Fisherman Moore hobbled out for a few hours fishing. He managed to find his way as far as the field; and, just as his breath was about to give out, he sat down on his familiar log, put his rod together, and began casting into the open. Not very far away, under a magnolia tree, lurked the aloof and cock-sure Matilda, viewing Fisherman Moore with scorn.



After a bit, Fisherman Moore leaned over and kicked up a stone near the log, finding beneath it a fat white worm of the sort which turn into beetles with the coming of Spring. He was not so blind but that he saw it, chuckling at his good luck, he baited his hook with it.

A moment later, Todd Spaulding, coming out of the barn, heard the clash of a reel and was amazed to see Fisherman Moore standing almost erect, his dim eyes blazing with old-time fire, his rod bent, his reel buzzing, while at the end of a good forty feet of line was Matilda, rushing with frantic strides for the woods.

"Great day in the mornin'!" yelled Todd. "It's that dern turkey. He's got her, he's got her! Hold her! Don't let her go! She's hooked. Now don't let her get all the line on you!"

"Todd Spaulding," screamed the Fisherman in return, "this is the whoopingest ole bass Ah hab ever hooked on to yet. How this fish can pull! Man, oh, man, it must be big!" With these words, which took his attention slightly from his catch, the Fisherman went tumbling backward over the log at a quick jerk of the line from Matilda. The pole was waving in the air along with a pair of stiff legs. The turkey had suddenly slackened the line.

"Give her the butt! Give her the butt! Give her the butt!" hooted Todd, as he rushed forward. Even where he lay the fisherman's blood in Fisherman Moore responded to this frantic appeal and, as the rod bent in a tense half circle,

a race began such as Columbus County had never seen before.

Round and round went Matilda, with the white grub worm in her crop and the line above it gripped tightly in her strong beak; and round and round, chasing after her, went Todd Spaulding, his arms outstretched, waving desperately like the turkey's wings as his big boots dented the soft pasture turf with the vigor of his gallop. And, in the center, Fisherman Moore, too nearsighted to see what he had hooked, had risen to one knee and revolved with the bird, his soul wrapped up in one idea--to keep the butt of his rod aimed at the whirling game.

It was a veritable scene of pandemonium. The little world had become a churning, topsy-turvey of nods and becks, squeaks and squawks, grunts and groans, sighs and shouts. Feathers flew, curses were cawed, bodies bounced and flounced in all directions. Wills clashed; wings flapped and fluttered. Tempers raged; the reel bent to and fro, as if the universe itself had speeded up. Nature seemed to be eaten up in the grotesqueness of man's wit pit against a crafty animal. Reversals were reversed as an animal struggled for survival against its conquering hero, man. It was almost as though this little section of Columbus County had been fit for Herod's pursuit of every male under three.

"Hang on to the reel, tighter, reel her in, we'll get her yet!!" shouted Todd in his already fading breath. Suddenly, he caught his toe on a root, stumbled over his own feet, and went sprawling into the depths of a prickly bush.



This would have been the perfect moment for Inventor Freeman to enter and lend a hand; and, indeed, he had heard from the fields on the other side of the farm the great commotion--alternately, shouts and squawks--that was taking place; and he began to make his way toward the noise but, as luck would have it, he stepped into one of the raccoon traps **that he had set out for Matilda and was having the devil's** own time trying to release himself. With one foot held fast, he let up a series of cries of pain and rage.

By this time, Todd's head began to emerge from the bushes, and he beheld a wonderful sight. Fisherman Moore was again on his feet, staring in wild astonishment at Matilda, whom he had sighted for the first time. She was flouncing around within ten feet of his face, and to his great astonishment there was no pressure on the reel since Matilda was swallowing up the line in big gulps. She was undoubtedly determined not only to have the grub but all that **went with it -- her greed overcoming her desire to escape.**

Fisherman Moore was elated and dismayed at once-- Matilda was gradually getting closer to the Thanksgiving roasting pan with every inch of line she ate; but, at the same time, Fisherman Moore moaned, "Lawdy, she's eatin' all mah tackle, mah valuable tackle! She ain't no lass, she's a dadblamed goat!"

"Don't worry," shouted Todd, "Ah reckon she'll stop at the pole. We got her now!"

Todd scrambled out of his bushy bed and started to chase

her once more. The line had gotten shorter and the chase was over quickly; when Todd got a good grip on the desperate fowl, not an easy thing to do, he pulled a knife from his belt and stabbed into the bird. The two men stood at peace at last, gasping for breath. "Lawdy, dat's the wildest bird Ah ever did see! And the eatingest! She ate all mah tackle, Lawd ha mercy!" cried the old fisherman, realizing that it was over for old Matilda. They stood there for a moment, Todd holding the heavy bird, his knife stuck in her, the line in the turkey's mouth, the pole in the fisherman's hands.

Once they got back to the barnyard with their catch, they were jubilant. Aunt Minnie helped them behead and defeather the bird. Cleaning her was Todd's job; and he had a terrible time disengaging her from the tackle, since she was as steadfast in death as in life. All the while, Inventor Freeman was thinking of a way to invent a trap which would automatically release its victim. "It would be a great invention, Aunt Minnie," he proclaimed, "in the service of humanity."

"Ah wish you'd invent yo'self over here an' help me clean up all dese turkey feathers insteada sittin' dere with yo' crazy idees," was all that Aunt Minnie could reply.

Now that Matilda was dead, one would think that Todd and Aunt Minnie and Fisherman Moore and Inventor Freeman could rest easy. But, dead or alive, Matilda had a mind of her own, and Thanksgiving at Todd Spaulding's farm turned out a little differently from the way one might have expected



THIS final capture of Matilda by the Spaulding clan reached the far ends of Columbus County and laughter was everyone's privilege to enjoy. Old Aunt Lil Graham said that she knew that Todd Spaulding had "bit off mo' than he could chew" when he brought that old turkey up as if it were a pet.

Her cousin, Aunt Letcy Mitchell, said that she knew that old turkey's father and he "sho was a mean critter. Lawd ha' mercy he was! He done up many a pea patch and sweet potato field without a blink of his ahz. Neber seed anythin' lahke him in mah lahfe, excep' Matilda. Lahke father, lahke daughter."

"Lawd knows," grunted old Uncle Bish Webb, "thar ain't nothin' that could come from a mean ol' tom-turkey 'cept an ol' hussy lahke Matilda. Done seed that ol' turkey rip up a 'bacca crop, then tear into Aunt Crettie Campbell's azalea garden and then hab 'nough gumption to lock rumps with ol' Uncle Duval Moore, the mailman, when he come down the road to Todd's house with some letters fo' the family."

"Jess knowed they'd hab to git rid o' her some tahme or other," mumbled old Aunt Bula Graham. "Sho did, sho did. Folks cain't lib with that sort of foolishness too loang. Ah dassent say much 'bout the way they raise that thar ol' turkey Matilda, but it don't matter nare bit. She jess done had bad wild blood in her an' thar ain't nothin' you kin do 'about that."

Meanwhile, the great day had arrived, Thanksgiving Day, at Spaulding's Farm. Contrary Matilda had been dead some twelve hours. She had been cleaned and placed in Aunt Minnie's largest roaster. The entire Spaulding household showed signs of fatigue. They all had scars and battle wounds

from the previous day's encounter with a boisterous and "fight-to-the-death" Matilda. Indeed, the tough hen turkey had lost the battle but it turned out that she won the war. No one dared say so, but as the day went on it was clear in everyone's mind that just as she was fierce and rough in life she was equally ornery in death.

This same bright Thanksgiving morning Todd Spaulding started for Hallsboro, his mind full of commissions from Aunt Minnie. In spite of their premonitions, the Spauldings decided to go through with the customary Thanksgiving festivities. Todd was afraid that he would forget some of the impossible tasks his wife asked of him, and Aunt Minnie was of the same mind as her husband. The air was crisp from the November frost and Todd dashed out the door in his customary haste.

Aunt Minnie watched through the stiff dimity kitchen curtains as Todd hastily raced to Janie, his pet mule. He hitched her up to the buggy that had not been moved in four days, and with an eager, "Git up thar!" gave her a slap with the reins.

The next moment a ripping sound split the air and Inventor Freeman opened the front door just in time to see the unlikely events unfolding before his eyes. He could hear Aunt Minnie's raucous laughter through the closed kitchen windows.

The mule was dashing out of the yard on a furious run, and Todd Spaulding, without the buggy, was striding closely behind. He clung to the reins with all of his strength as his long legs wheeled around and around in order to keep pace with Janie's mad forward motion. The mule seemed to be galloping off in all directions at the same time. Inventor Freeman could not help but recall a similar scene from the day before when Matilda had been taking gigantic swoops like Todd's in full flight away from



her frantically chasing would-be captors in futile pursuit.

"Here, here," called Inventor Freeman. "You'se out of yo' mahnd, you done forgit the buggy! What ails you anyway? Come back, Todd, you done forgit the buggy. You's gonna git hurt." The last of the warning got lost in a sudden fit of titters and giggles that came over Inventor Freeman as he regarded the incongruity of the scene before him. He leaned against the side of the house in his submission to weakening laughter. Humor, like grief, when deep and sudden in its attack on the human spirit, is physically overwhelming and complete.

"Lawd ha' mercy," shouted Todd as he spun around the gatepost, "do you reckon Ah'm sech a fool that Ah don't know that Ah'm rahdin' without the buggy?"

With this plea for an acceptance of his natural intelligence, Todd vanished in the distance up the road in the wake of the galloping mule's stubbornness. He still clung steadfast to the reins as his voice trailed away in the distance.

"Ah jess don't believe he didn't go off and totally forgit that ol' buggy," Inventor Freeman snickered out in his graying beard. "Ah's sho 'nough he's capable of it. Todd Spaulding's one of the most forgitful an' one of the most unthinkin' men Ah ever did see. O well," he mused, "guess Ah reckon Ah ought not signify so much. He's rahght nahce to me. But he's blame dumb at tahmes. Lawd knows, he'd take offin' his ears and forgit them ef they weren't 'tached to his haid by the Lawd," continued Inventor Freeman who was as critical of the silly conduct of other people as he was oblivious of his own.

Grumbling and chuckling alternatively under his breath all the while about Todd's inordinate witlessness, Inventor Freeman moved down the porch

steps and ambled to where the idle buggy stood. He smiled slightly, spat a powerful stream of tobacco juice off to his left side--he was deadly accurate with that craft when there was a spittoon handy--and bent over the hind wheels of the vehicle. He discovered that the ground had frozen hard overnight--"Rare fur these hyar parts," he muttered--and the buggy's wheels were held into the ground as in a vice. Todd had apparently started the anxious mule suddenly and the sorry animal jerked away quickly forward, taking Todd with him along with the harness and leaving the buggy and its shaft abandoned like a bird's nest in the late autumn.

An hour later, Todd led old Janie back into the yard. The mule had lost most of its spunk and its master showed signs of fatigue in both his face and his gait. "Lawd, sometimes Ah cain't hardly git this critter to move, an' then when Ah gits her to move, Ah cain't git her to stop. Lawd, Ah's jess 'bout give out," complained Todd as he entered the kitchen where Aunt Minnie had just finished churning the butter.

"Ah swanny," Aunt Minnie snarled as she turned to face her exhausted husband. "Ah ain't neber seen nothin' so foolish as a man drivin' a mule off without a buggy in mah whole lahfe. Sometahmes you ain't got the sense you was boan with. Ah had to po' all mah hot water out oan that thar buggy to git it loose from the groun'. Now Ah's got to boil some mo' fur washin' these hyar dishes and fur cookin'. Thank Gawd we done clean Matilda las' nahght. Ah's tahred 'nough, Todd Spauldin', without yo' nonsense. Lawd knows fur someone who got so much sense you act crazy sometahmes. An' as fur that ol' pet mule of yo's, Janie, she ain't worth a blink of mah ahye. Lan' sakes, gonna take a long tahmie to git 'nough water fur the res' o' the day. You acts lahke you ain't got a speck of sense. Well, let's git oan with the day's work. It ain't started rahght but dassent think we cain't



git the dinner fixed fur Thanksgivin'. Ah has mah doubts, 'cuz there ain't nare bird in the worl' lahke Matilda. But Ah'll give it a trah." The distraught woman pulled her bonnet down tighter. "Ah wouldn't be surprahzed one bit ef she don't come back to haïnt us, a bird lahke that!" But she tied her apron strings tighter to show her determination to make the best of the rest of the day's occupations, the main one being to cook Matilda.

Suddenly she turned to Todd and asked him for the items that she had sent him to Hallsboro for in the first place. He rolled his dark eyes up at her as if wounded by the inquiry. Then, sheepishly he covered his face with his large brown left hand and said, "Lawd, forgive me, Ah done plain forgot all the things you wanted, so confused was Ah, y'see honey. Ah's so sorry. Ah git Janie an rahde off again and this tahme Ah promise to bring back yo' goods, sho will, sho will."

He did not wait for her next tirade. Completing an about face, he darted out of the door with a renewal of energy and ran across the field to the barn in order to hitch up Janie to the buggy. His efforts were successful and the next time Aunt Minnie and Inventor Freeman saw Todd he was dashing up the road towards Hallsboro behind Janie, but this time he was in the buggy.

"Sho has got that buggy fastened up this tahme," repeated Inventor Freeman with some sense of renewed respect for Todd.

"Don't be so sho," rejoined Aunt Minnie, who was nothing if not skeptical. "Besahdes, thar ain't no guaranteein' he won't forgit mah order again. Lawd knows how Ah suffers with that man's lack o' memory. Lawd knows that ol' sow, Sally, she got better remembrance than Todd Spauldin'. Yassir, it's the truth, Lawd ha' mercy on me."

Aunt Minnie's fears were justified. Todd came home an hour later

with an irritable, tired mule and none of her commissions in hand. She shrugged her broad shoulders when she discovered her husband's second failure. She was resigned to his failings. A third trip, she ruled out immediately. It would probably only have amounted to the same futility that seemed to have beset the entire day, thanks--Aunt Minnie thought--to the powers of Matilda that extended beyond her natural life-span. She asked the Lord to help her through her frustrations and set about with that kind of resignation that expects only the worst to happen. Her predilections for doom were exact, for she cooked the greens, turnips, and corn to rags. The pies came out of the oven looking like charcoal shells, and the sweet potatoes were soggy; the cornbread, scorched; and the biscuits had almost turned to stones.

As for the star of the show, Matilda was lifted from the brick oven, placed on the kitchen table and attacked by Todd Spaulding and Inventor Freeman with gusto, sharing the carving honors. But their newly sharpened knives bounced off Matilda's sides and hind quarters like arrows off a steel wall. "Ah cain't eben git a grip on 'er," the Inventor exclaimed at length. They tried cooking her for three more hours but it proved to be a waste of time. They pierced her breast and sides with icepicks and screwdrivers so as to penetrate the unbroken skin for the juices to escape. They cooked the bird another hour but every time Aunt Minnie tried to stick the bird with her two-pronged cooking fork Matilda's hide resiliently resisted.

"What the hen-fahre's the matter with this hyar ol' hen-hussy?!" screamed Todd in exasperation as he backed away from the disputatious turkey. "Minnie," he said, his eyes ablaze with rage, "git me mah gun. This hyar sorry ol' bird's jess determined to win no matter what we folks do. Ah jess cain't stan' it no mo'."



"Jess keep quahet fur a moment," insisted Inventor Freeman with a more deliberate air. "You gits upset 'bout nothin'. Go git yo' saw, Todd, an' we'll give that a trah. Told you yesterday that this hyar dern ol' bird wasn't worth a leaky bucket. The sorry thing oughten to have been kilt some tahme ago. Now we's stuck with her on Thanksgivin' an there ain't nothin' we kin do but saw her to bits an' then boil her. Personally, Ah'd lahke to boil 'er in oil! Ah swanny, Ah's gonna do somethin' 'bout these chickens an' ducks an' turkeys oan this hyar farm. They's 'tirely too tough when Aunt Minnie gits finish cookin' 'em anyways."

Of course, Aunt Minnie didn't take any too kindly to the last remark. Aunt Minnie stood sulking while Todd went outside to get the saw. Yesterday she had laughed heartily, she recalled, as Fisherman Moore had circled round and round with strutting, struggling Matilda at the end of his line in the middle of the field. Well, then they thought they were all victorious because Matilda had been captured and killed. Their victory might have been sweet and total yesterday, but time is the great leveler for those who claim success too early, too proudly. Matilda lay open in front of them, dead, roasted for untold hours, filled with charred over-cooked stuffing, browner than the clay earth on which she trod just yesterday, oozy with what little grease she had produced during her long stay in the Spaulding oven--but victorious. When Todd returned with his saw, they looked at each other with the kind of gaze that expresses helplessness and hopelessness. Even with the saw the struggle was futile; the meat did not fall off in slices, but clung steadfastly in long strands as if Matilda's entire body were made of gristle.

The old one-handed clock--for by this time, the minute hand had been gone for a number of months--struck some hour and stopped again.

Todd looked up at it and said, "That thar dadblamed thing's wrong again. Ah thought you pushed that han' fo'ward once befo' today," he said to Aunt Minnie. "Well, Ah guess it needs help again. It's near 'bout dinner tahme, the sun done gone down, an' that old clock says it's only three o'clock. We don't hab no dinner but that ain't no reason whah that ol' clock shouldn't be rahght. Lawd, sometahmes Ah think this ol' clock is mo' trouble than it's worth." He reached up and pushed the hour-hand a little bit ahead. It was a regular thing for Aunt Minnie, who always went by that clock's chiming on the hour, to tell Miss Lollie at church on a Sunday morning that it was the clock's fault for her tardiness. Indeed, if someone did not move it every now and then, there was no telling when Aunt Minnie would have breakfast, lunch, or dinner ready. As it was, she was never on time for anything.

It was now a very gloomy Thanksgiving evening, but Todd, who had an amazing talent for rectifying all troubles with a smile and an inventive escape into a world of rationalization, moved back from the victorious bird, embraced Aunt Minnie, and said, much to her surprise, "Well, bless you, dear Aunt Minnie. Bless you twahce an' mo'. Ever since Ah was<sup>o</sup> teensy chahl' Ah's been lookin' fo'ward fur the tahme when Ah could hab a Thanksgiving dinner without meat--no turkey an' all that ol' stuff that does with it. Ah dreamed of habin' nothin' but bread an' milk. Thank Gawd, and you, Aunt Minnie, Ah has the chance now." He kissed her on the cheek and moved away convinced that he had made good out of an otherwise impossible situation.

"Lawd, Lawd," drawled old Fisherman Moore who had sat in the corner all day long waiting for his Thanksgiving dinner, "the whole mess done gone to his haid. Well, ef Ah ain'ts gonna git no dinner, Ah thinks Ah



Louis Mitchell  
bes' go to baid."

Inventor Freeman also decided to retire, leaving Aunt Minnie to clean up the disarray in the kitchen.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. "Hope it ain't company," cried out Todd with some degree of alarm. "We sho ain't got nothin' to feed 'em with."

There was a louder knock. Fisherman Moore appeared in the doorway of his room just off the kitchen. Inventor Freeman bounded down the stairs, saying, "Ah'll get the do'," and when he opened it, there before him, in mid-air was a large platter of food, with an aroma that immediately permeated the whole house. One by one people entered, each one carrying a platter. The last to enter from the porch was Uncle Henry Freeman carrying the biggest platter of food Todd ever did see containing an enormous turkey, a hen on the side, big slices of country ham, bacon slabs, smoked sausages, chitlins, and thick pork chops--in short all the things recommended by Uncle Henry Freeman's diet, which was famous from one end of Columbus County to another. Miss Lollie Freeman brought some of her cakes, and Rev. Kenny Graham offered his humble pot of ham-flavored collard greens.

"Well," said Uncle Henry Freeman, "we all heared 'bout the battle with Matilda. We knows you been chasin' that ol' bird fo' some tahme now. Some of us even took part in the chase. But Ah always said that eben if you caught her she'd be the worst meal in the history of Columbus County. We jess knowed y'all wouldn't hab much of a Thanksgiving dinner with that thar ornery ol' hussy of a bid. She was sorry in life and she had to be sorry in death--not worth an 'am-I-born-to-die." So Ah sez to Aunt Hattie, 'Let's jess take our meat ober thar an' share it. It'll taste jess as good ober yonder.' So we's all brung our stuff. Rev. Graham's been so

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nahce about it he'd <sup>helps</sup> gonna let Miss Lollie thank the Lawd fo' us this evening. Sho is. Ain't that rahght nahce?"

Miss Lollie cleared her throat and said, "Lawd ha' mercy on us chillun. It sho is good to be good neighbors. Thar ain't much lub in the worl' these days. What the worl' needs is jess a little mo' lub an' a little mo' prayer."

"Amen, amen," said Rev. Graham, "say it rahght oan, Sister Lollie. Praise the Lawd."

The blessing was said over the course of the next fifteen minutes, Miss Lollie making sure that she impressed everyone with her gift of prayer. She did not like her competitor, Rev. Graham, to go away with any notions of her being an inferior minister of God. "Folks <sup>does</sup> ~~done~~ talk," she would say, "and they does compare."

Hours later, Todd sat back in his rickety armchair with a feeling of relief and gratitude that had its source in the kindness of his neighbors. "Mah stomach is sho full but <sup>someime</sup> someone Ah sho lahkes to trah a bread an' milk Thanksgiving anyway someday," he thought. He looked up at the old clock, stood up, stretched, and walked over to it to push its hands at least, he judged, two hours forward. Aunt Minnie and Miss Lollie had just finished in the kitchen. Uncle Henry Freeman and his wife had gone on home and the Reverend had had some other calls to make. Inventor Freeman and Fisherman Moore were in their rooms fast asleep, having had the best meal that they could remember in quite a spell.

As Todd moved back from the clock, Miss Lollie walked by him. "Lan' sake, Todd, that's the folly o' the worl', that ol' clock. Cain't y'all get that goin' without havin' to mahnd it lahke a baby? Whah don't you git one o' them clocks you wahnd?"



"Well, Miss Lollie," Todd explained rather timidly, "ef we done had that kahnd o' clock Ah thinks we'd forgit to wahnd it. Ain't it better to 'member every hour or so?"

"What nonsense, Boy! You ain't got much sense but Ah thought you'd learn better someday. Jess lahke yo' ol' Uncle Israel. No wonder yo' wahfe ain't neber to church on tahme. Ain't neber seed nothin' any mo' foolish in mah days as preacher at Miss Lollie's Temple. Ah ain't neber 'spected you to come to church, neither, Todd. You's jess lahke yo' Aunt Pet, yo' Uncle Jervy, an' yo' ol' Granpa Bill. No accounts, the whole lot o' them. You ain't none of you worth two daid geese, a hornet, an' a fly swatter."

Todd was used to Miss Lollie's tirades. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a five dollar bill and handed it to her. He was saving it to buy Fisherman Moore some new tackle, but he thought he'd better mollify Miss Lollie. "Hyar, use this to buy some prayer-books for the chillun," he said.

"Well, that will he'p," said Miss Lollie, somewhat perked up after all. "Sho was glad to he'p y'all this evening with some food. We all was. You knows," Miss Lollie philosophized, "neighbors are kind especially when they is trahin' to outdo one 'nother to be thought of as good an' helpful."

The winter rolled in and then the spring came to Todd Spaulding's Farm again with its usual pleasures. The rains wet the seeded earth and the folks in Columbus County opened their doors and windows so that the strong salt air of the sea could blow away the cobwebs and dust. The honeysuckle filled the air with its sweetness and the oak, the maple, the sour- and sweet-gum trees shook themselves and threw their boughs

to the sky for refreshing rain and delightful sunlight.

Someone asked Todd Spaulding why his fowl population was without wings this spring.

"O Lawd ha' mercy on us all. Inventor Freeman is trying to think of a way to prevent feathers from growing on turkeys an' chickens so that they cain't fly. In the meantime, he done cut off the wings o' the ducks, the geese, the chickens, an' the turkeys. He don't want no mo' fowl meat flyin' away from him when we wants to eat it. All that exercise makes <sup>em</sup> ~~up~~ too tough. Besahdes, it makes 'em hard to catch. He ain't neber gonna forgit Matilda's las' stand. He sho ain't.

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