

Baptized at Last.

by Louis D. Mitchell.

Buzz Spaulding said that it all happened to him over near the sawmill late one afternoon. "Somethin' done spoke to me an' Ah knowed Ah was called by my Lord Jesus Christ. It was sho somethin' in mah lahfe. Ah ain't never gona forgit it neither." He brushed a large bead of sweat from his reddish brown cheek, lifted his eyes to heaven and said in a reverential ejaculation, "Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus." He was silent for the moment as he looked up toward the fading horizon and saw a similar scene. In fact, it had reminded him of his sudden conversion to the ways of our Lord Jesus Christ. The wind pushed the pine-smoke from just over the sawmill to where it bent to the level of the earth which it seemed to hug. ~~Then~~ he could see the shadowy smoke approach him. It was like a flock of black birds against a backdrop of tinted evening light. He could remember how long it took the sawdust piles to smolder and how sweet the pine needles had smelled after shedding time. They were elastic and comforting to the rabbit's feet.

He felt good all over as the sweet scent of sweetgum trees tickled his broad nose, as the pine smoke surrounded him and then curled up and hung in large ghostly wreathes about the head of the oaks, the sour gums, the cherry, the loblolly, the three-leaf maple, the magnolias, and the other southern pine trees. He tasted it in the air, in the water, and in his food. He felt it on his thick skin, and he saw it all about him as he entered his little home where his wife and child were waiting for him for supper. "Tomorrow's the day I shall receive mah Lord Jesus Christ as mah savior," he

said to Bula as he kissed her gently.

"Is you happy?" his wife ^{asked} said as she caught the light in his dark eyes.

"Ah sho is," Buzz rejoined "an' after tomorrow Ah ain't gona be Buzz no more. You may as well start callin' me bah mah real name now. Ah'm gona be knowed as Ulus Spaulding." He lifted his little son, Aaron to the sky, kissed him, placed him back in the cradle near the kitchen table and went off to wash his hands and change his smoky sawmill clothes.

Now everybody in Columbus County knew the history of Buzz Spaulding. They were all shocked one day when he even showed up at St. James Baptist church. They were even more surprised when he got happy that Sunday, stood up, shouted, clapped his large brown hands in rhythm and cried out a series of sins that even surprised all-knowing Miss Lollie Freeman. Later on that evening, Aunt Carrie consulted her book of other-people's sins and she had to admit later that she did not know, after all, the majority of Buzz Spaulding's wrong doings. "Ah was sho surprised," she told Mag Blanks after church the follllwing Sunday, "to know 'bout some of that stuff he done did in New York and in Philadelphia. Ah knowed that they was wicked and sinful places but not lahke he told urs. An' honey, them that things he said he done up thar in Durham jess turned mah liver green. Ah thought he'd have mo respect fur them ~~that~~ ^{these} Spauldings and Moores, and Merricks up thar than he had."

"Ain't it the truth," Mag replied, "Ain't it the truth."

"Well it jess goes to show you whut happens when you gives yo soul to Jesus. Guess Ah'll jess have to add to mah list of sins that the folks 'round hiar has committed. That thar list is sho gittin' long, Honey, sho is," Aunt Carrie Spaulding continued.

Miss Lollie who had compared her notes several times with those of Aunt Carrie stood silent in her tracks that Sunday--and it was one of those hot muggy days--when Buzz Spaulding ~~S~~houted out: "Ah ain't Buzz Spaulding no mo. Mah name is Ulus whut mah mama and Daddy done give me. And please, please, 'take mah soul to Jesus." Whereupon Miss Lollie sat down as Reverend Walter Campbell Graham kept on shouting, dancing, and half singing the praises of Necodemus in the Book of John. That was his text that morning and he refused to let it go without profuse repeated references. "Yes, ^{Lawd} ~~Laed~~, unless you are born again of me you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven," was his version of the text at this moment. He told of John the Baptist, the dove, and then of Christ's immersion in the River Jordan.

"Ah wants, Lawd, to be in that number," shouted Buzz, "Ah wants to be baptized in the Jordan, too. Lawd ha mercy on my sinful pass," he cried with sweat freely flowing from his body, with his eyes peering at the ceiling of the church, with his arms stretched out as if he were shaping his frame into a cross. He pushed himself up high onto the tip of his toes as if to ascend to heaven and begged Jesus to embrace him and take him home, over Jordan with the band of angels.

That very evening he was the discussion of the entire St. James community. Outside of some doors ghost trains of devils might have passed by if the list of Buzz Spaulding's sins would have been symbols of human permanent damnation. Some said that the ground trembled as they reviewed his past life. Others simply smiled forgivingly as they examined the hollow reports of other sinners in judgment of this young man. Bula Spaulding had been praying for her husband for at least four years and now her dreams and

prayers had come true. She had seen in this last conversion, pines almost literally whispering, then shouting to Jesus. She ^{knew} ~~knew~~ that Aunt Roberta Jacobs had come to her husband five years ago and asked him after he had impregnated her daughter, what he was going to do about it. He had smugly replied to her in cold abandon, "Ah; s done all that Ah'm gona to do, Miss Roberta."

Of course, Aunt Carrie was not least among those giving their documentary proofs about Ulus Spaulding's ways of iniquity. They were, to Reverend Graham, who saw these ways of these rural, mixed-blooded, sons and daughters of free issues, verification that the Blues are satisfactory and unsatisfactory documents about the human condition. They were dogma, to him, in spite of his evangelical training. The Blues and the people who make those Blues are more than songs, moans, groans, acts, contortions and shouts about lost lovers, and motherless children. They were art-songs, ~~must be~~, reflections of the range of human joy and despair, hope, faith, and anguish. They captured the immediacy of his people's life. They were not always very pretty, but they expressed something less than tragic, sorrowful, nonetheless, but somehow in it all, there was some clue to dealing with and coping with the vicissitudes and dangers to life ^{always} ~~all~~ with a sense of humor.

To Miss Lollie, however, Buzz's sins were more concrete, more immediately reprehensible. She saw it all change in church, she had to admit, but there was still skepticism in her mind and she had to express what she called the truth. Besides, she could not let the record go unreworkeed. She was not adversed to recalling the number of women--so many of them married, too--he had slept with in the barns of his employers during tobacco cropping time. How many

young girls he had courted and acted as their brother only to find that he ought to have been their husbands after all, was absolutely disgraceful to Miss Lollie. " He sho have caused the Blues in so many families, sho have," she told her gossiping counterpart, Aunt Carrie one day. "They say he done killed a man, his own chahle and two women in Durham and they's still lookin' fur him."

"Aint that the truth," Aunt Carrie chimed in. "Ah knows he done fathered six head of girls in Philadelphia and that black woman he lived with is now on relief."

"Well, hush yo mouth, Honey, you ain't told nothin yet. He done stole Professor Lloyd Spaulding's white mule, O Henry, fahve tahmes, drove it up to Clarkton, stole Lawd knows how many barrels of terperntine, and come back and sold them to jess 'bout everybody in Columbus County. It's a disgrace before the Lawd, it sho is. Many sinners goes in the water drah and comes out wet. You know, Carrie, Ah jess don't believe in scandal and repeatin' such stuff, but it ought to be told that Professor Lloyd Spaulding, who taught him in school along with Miss Josephine Freeman, was kahnd to that chahle, and look at whut he done done. He done hurt that ^{thar} that white mule, too, beatin' on him so hard and so often. And Professor didn't press charges neither."

"Lawd ha mercy," Aunt Carrie shouted out in censorious delight. As a point of her sententious manner, she stood up, accidentally tore her dress on the chair she was seated on--not quite as dignified as a New Testament priestess--and called for his condemnation before this forthcoming baptism. She immediately sat down upon seeing the scolding look in Miss Lollie's eyes, and said, "Ah knows it ain't gonna work. That thar Reverend Graham is jes too sof' on such cases. We needs mo' fahre and brimstone, in the church, Ah thinks. Don't you agree

with me Lollie, " she pleased for acquiescence in her rebuke.

"Jess remember, Honey, God speaks love and forgiveness. We's all sinners, and we ain't got no rahght to condemn other folks lahke you's been doing rahght hiar and now, Carrie. Ah's a minister of the Lawd and we's got to forgive and forgit this hiar mess you's been tellin' me." The air was clear, and they left off their slashing comments on the Blues, the sin, and the wretchedness that Ulus Spaulding had caused. They spoke of the preparations they had to make for the ~~4~~¹¹pounding of the preacher~~3~~--bringing him food, and goods for the oncoming baptism--since he had little money of his own. They had not upped his salary in St. James Baptist church in over ten years. But that was another extension and tithing was a part of the heavy price these simple country folks had to pay for their inspirational and congregational society.

It was late Sunday afternoon. The group with Reverend Graham at the head gathered down by the little creek for the baptism ceremony. The sun shot her rays in all directions to the east and the blazing source of light and energy seemed to concentrate on the sacred rites of salvation that were about to take place. The balmy air was sweet with the scents from cane, the fragrance of the Southern pine, the soft delicate odors of the sweet-gum and the sour gums. The cotton-~~bol~~^{boll} blooms dropped in the distance and the tasty mist touched the very ovaries of the myriads of flowers that the bees were abandoning for the day. Roots twisted away from the slow-moving creek and the parched red soil lay bare for cooking night. Both the pain and beauty of the South, the lives of these happy and tormented people, the mingled blood of their history, and the congealed experience

of their fight with time and circumstance began at this moment to heave, rise, and writhe in the mysticism of the promise that would make Buzz Spaulding, young Ulus Spaulding, become an old man of the community, forgiven and accepted. Fertility, identity at least, freedom finally in the discovery of one's roots in this red sandy soil-fruitful and worked over and through--were to be the fulfillment of the promise of this little, out-of-the-way baptism in one corner of Columbus County. Black roots, red roots, sandy soil, red clay, African blood, Mongolian blood, white blood, violence, hatred, fear, chastisement, cruelty, brutality, rejection, and love told the story all at once in counterpunal rhythms in Ulus Spaulding's vision of himself and the world at this time. He knew he was guilty of having wounded many of ~~this~~ Father's children. His subconscious only hinted that he was guiltless of his people's blood. Then the sun set low in its cradle in the distant woods. Songs of pine-dreams were brought to the edge of the creek and the night-birds took over the day-bird's choruses.

Buzz Spaulding recalled vividly the words that were spoke to Nicodemus, "Amen, Amen I say to you, unless a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Ulus Spaulding did not see any doves around, no opening of the heavens where angels would be singing, but he did feel deeply that this was a new day in his life--the beginning of a new era. He had bathed his body thoroughly that morning in the old galvanized washbucket. He had used not only two drawings of water but far too much soap according to his wife. He was this evening going to be washed in the blood of the Lamb. Aunt Carrie had already instructed him that the water in the cre^ek became blood and so he was to refer to it in that manner until the special service was over. Uncle Henry Freeman had already pronounced loud and bold that it "waren't any different from bath water, nare bit, neither." It was not the color of the blood, but it was different from both blood and water.

*born again
he
cannot
see the
Kingdom
of
God.
3:3*

Ulus stood in the water at the edge of the creek. He was tall, broad, and strong physically but he felt weak in the eyes of the Lord. He stood between the middle of the slow-clear creek and Reverend Graham. The preacher held a Bible in his hands and peered over the edge of his horn rimmed glasses at the young man who was about to give his soul to Jesus.

Reverend Graham was from a sermon-proof generation. He spend much of his time trying to keep kindled the once torrid fires of Puritan conviction and zeal. He was secure in what he felt to be the unalterable fact of God's presence in the world (of which fact nature itself was the greatest object lesson). Reverend Graham, aware of the new church of the Free Issue Negroes of the South, felt free to exercise to the utmost of his powers of emotion and reason the attempt to attain the concept of the true nature of God. The entire fabric of the Protestant-ethic-bound notions of work and thrift--mingled with the Afro-American twists of pleasure and immediacy--the Reverend wore well. He felt that he could moderate--unlike Miss Lollie--the insistance of the complete depravity and helplessness of man, philosophy, and the need for diversion, love, and human participation in the affairs of God.

Ulus stood attentive as he looked down into the lucid body of water. He could see his bare feet, washed more times this day than ever before. The same warm water washed over the high boots of the preacher and a frightened fish darted by now and then.

The preacher lifted his right foot--an idiosyncrasy which always introduced one of his several deliveries. The movement caused a wave of sandy water to lick against the side of Ulus' left foot.

The young man held his breath for a short sharp moment and the hot blood of excited anticipation rushed to his heart.

Reverend Graham stretched out his enormous dark right hand to Ulus and chanted loud enough for all around to hear: "Have you, Ulus Spaulding, received the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

"Ah have," replied Ulus with ecstasy in his heart and the peace of Christ in his soul.

"Do you desire to follow in the baptism and unite in the fellowship of the church?"

"Yes, yes my Jesus, yes Lawd, yes my Jesus," shouted Ulus as he lifted his right hand to his breast and started to cry with joy and relief.

"Then I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Ghost," changed the emphatic preacher ending with an extended "amen." Amens came from all directions and from all members in the most unrhythmic delivery. Then someone instinctively started clapping his hands and a chorus of animated amens began to rise up to heaven and joyous voices joined in singing "Hallelujah, it's done, I believe on the Son, I am saved by the blood of the crucified One."

The preacher took hold of the larger man and gently submerged him in the water and let his hold slacken once he was totally immersed. Ulus convulsed slightly from the shock and came up hollering just as Miss Lollie told him that every Christian did when he was transformed. Then the young happy man smiled and walked away to the edge of the creek, dripping, and "saved at last." He heard the congregation singing louder than ever, "In that great gettin up mornin', fare thee well, fare

thee well."

The music mounted into his wet flesh, jubilant heart, and ecstatic soul. He got down on his knees next to Bula his wife who was holding their son in her arms and began to cry.

They bid farewell to all of the brothers and sisters who had come to witness the miracle, climbed into the buggy, lashed the recalcitrant mule, and rode homeward past old Uncle Ben ~~(Chessfire)~~ Spaulding's property. As they approached their red-roofed bungalow the sun was withdrawing from the last steps of the day. They saw something on their porch as they looked through the rosy depths of the distance. They descended immediately in front of their home and quizzically approached the large object. They were so filled with elation and religious fervor, goodwill and love for all mankind that they both suggested to themselves almost simultaneously, instinctively, that someone was being good to them by leaving them gifts for the occasion. "Probably", thought Bula, "It is manna. Some women have gotten together and brought us some food. Folks always thinks of eatin' and feedin' when thar's a celebration down hiar. Lawd, knows how good they is."

"It must be something fur me, " thought Ulus Spaulding. "Ah've received the Lawd, that's enough fur me. Unless you are born again you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven," Ah knows that to be true, now," he recalled. "Lawd Ah jess ain't worthy of all this hiar goodness from you an' all the folks. Ah ain't been a good man, but Ah'll make up fur it, Ah promise," he reflected.

They mounted the porch steps and opened the top of the gently folded box. It was only partially closed. They looked in ^{and} saw a large

~~diamond~~ ^{wedding} ring shining radiantly. Ulus started for a moment. Then there was a picture of a beautiful woman sitting on a chair in front of a large city apartment dwelling. Then they heard a soft whimper from beneath these findings. Ulus removed this covering of cotton and paper on which these treasures rested and beheld two little faces. They were soundly sleeping and smiling in that slumber like Moses rested finally in Miriam's arms.

Ulus lifted one out. It was dressed like a little girl. Around its neck it wore a silver chain with a name tag saying: "My name is Ida Jacobs Spaulding." He handed the little bundle to his wife whose arms were already filled with their own first born son. Then he bent over and brought forth the second child. It was a boy with curly blond hair and a button-shaped nose. He too, wore a chain,-- it was golden--with a name tag saying: "My name is Ulus Graham Spaulding. My father lives here and my mother is a minister's daughter. I am not least among the children."

They entered the house together in silence. Bula prepared Ulus's children for bed immediately with automatic devotion. Maternity and all that it promotes was the guiding spirit. She realized, too, like her crucified and resurrected husband that one has to be hurt deeply in order to change significantly. Ulus sat down in the large kitchen chair reserved for him by his good woman, sighed, thanked the Lord once more, and felt like Lot having escaped from Sodom. He knew from that moment on with his present strength and commitment to Jesus Christ as his personal friend and savior that she, Bula his wife, would not look back and therefore would not turn into a pillar of salt.