

THE KITE

by Louis D. Mitchell

Dedicated to my nephew, Kyer Spaulding

Ulus Mitchell was nine years old. He was a small child for his age with curly black hair that stood up in righlets and often fell down onto his narrow forehead. His eyes were large, brown, sensitive and thoughtful to his own plentiful thoughts and feelings. His sharp nose tapered off to a soft mouth that remained slightly open on most occasions showing poor teeth and a pink tongue. His tinted skin-texture, oily, as soft as suede, and tightly folded over high cheekbones gave way some of the more subtle aspects of what happens when bloods are mixed. His feet were small, and so were his hands, like those of a future artist.

Since his great-grandfather, Zay Mitchell, had come down from Onslow County with Ben and Davie, his sons, with a half Indian-half white wife, Ulus's family had lived in Columbus County, North Carolina for over ninety years. They had property here which the natives called Up-Ahead, and they had lived by their land and their wits as did their neighbors and relatives, the Moores, the Spauldings,

the Freemans, and the Jacobs. Since old Ben Spaulding had bought up and worked over this small track of land--ten miles long and five miles wide, forty miles from Wilmington, his relatives had managed to remain isolated, inbred in their racial mixture, and hardworking as they obeyed the Puritan ethic--the ethic that had both blessed and cursed them at the same time.

But Ulus Mitchell was a child and in his world he refused to accept chaos completely for what it was. With that fearlessness that goes with innocence and the heedless wrecklessness that accompanies the hopes of the child, the aspirations of the scientist, and the desire of the saint, Ulus plunged himself into that world of his own creation. It was that world just beyond ordinary human experience. Ulus Mitchell had a secret longing--in fact, it was a dream.

He wanted a kite. He yearned to feel the strength of it in his hands as it fought arduously against the wind far above his head. He longed to hold the string tight in his little hands, play it out or wind it in. He wanted to dash with it across the tobacco fields or the cow pasture, following the tiny patch of color in the sky. He wanted to feel as free as the kite as it danced to the high-pitched music of the wind.

He had seen several kites in the little store up in Clarktown one time when Grandpa Ben had taken him up there on his mule and buggy. They were too expensive his Uncle Henry Freeman had told him even before he and his grandfather had made the trip. "Ah'll meck ya one," Aunt Callie offered. And until she did, Ulus would sit and dream of the day when he would have his kite. It would be made of the finest bright red paper. It danced invitingly before his

bedazzled eyes. It's tail was like the disjointed tail of his shepherd dog trailing far behind, cavorting, prancing, capering, with wild movements across the heavens. His heart jumped and danced in rhythmic amusement with the kite as it soared upward above the land. It seemed to have left the clouds far behind, floated on high, buffeted to and fro by the currents of wind. And so, with yearning in his heart, Ulus waited for Aunt Callie to fulfill her promise. He dreamed as every child dreams.

Ulus once stood near one of his older brother's tobacco fields all day long. Bennie Mitchell approached him and asked why he had not been in school. "Don't chu know, Boy, yo papa's gonna whup yo butt ten tahmes ef he fahnds out you's been out hiar. Whut's you been doin'?" he asked his younger brother.

Ulus looked up into his big brother's face pleadingly. His hold on his dream had weakened for the moment. He was confronted by one of life's immediate disorders, namely, danger and then its consequences. A tear formed in his right eye and slowly trickled down his sharply chiseled face. His dark eyes caught those blue shadows of his brother's look. Benny bent over, brushed the tear away, embraced and kissed his mother's child. But Ulus knew that Bennie would tell Papa John Wesley Mitchell and there would be a beating and punishment because he had dreamed of his kite all day long and he had not gone off to Farmer's Union School.

Ulus looked up again in order to catch his brother's eyes. He did not. They were staring off ahead. They were a polished granite blue, like those of Grandma Mary Frances. They were not the kind of eyes one falls into and gets lost in. They were hard

places with a deflecting gloss. They twinkled now and then but always turned serious. They yielded to thoughts of righteousness and punishment. They had weight. They opened to the sweep and grace of Columbus County but reflected the unbending truths and commandments of the Bible which they read night after night before closing for sleep.

As Ahab went to justice and Judas betrayed His Lord, Ulus went to his father's hands for whipping and Bennie handed his little brother over for the fulfillment of the prophesy. Aunt Callie was told not to make that kite "fer some tahme to come. Sometahmes that thar chahle ain't worth a am-Ah-bone-to-dah," said Rhodie Mitchell as she placed a corn pone and ham hock for supper in front of Ulus that evening. "Eat chahle," she commanded, "You's gonin' ta bed early tonight. Mercy sake's alahve, ef you wasn't gonna go to school tomorrow Ah'd fix ya widt some three Sixes o some sassafras tea. Ah knows whut ails ya. You's a little bilious and you needs a good cleanin' out."

Ulus went to bed that night. He cried for a while, but he was glad to be alone so that he could dream all over again about his kite. He thought that somehow he would get some money and buy a kite. It would cost so much he knew, but waiting for Aunt Callie would mean that he might be a big boy before she finished making it. His brother Lonnie had always said that Aunt Callie was as slow as a stubborn mule with three legs. The dream returned and he saw rows of kites in a store hanging from the ceiling. They were like dead butterflies with their colorful wings folded. But one could see the hidden life in each creased kite. He could imagine that they were

like trees opening up in spring, like tassels hit and swung out glittering and shimmering in the sun. He felt a breeze enter into the shop. It rustled through the kites and they shook. They trembled with suppressed energy. Their multi-colored paper rippled with anticipation. They were like the wild birds imprisoned in cages in the zoos of large cities, Ulus thought. They needed to be let free from within the cramped space in his mind's eye. They ought to be like the buzzards or the chicken hawks rising and dipping on the winds that caressed the warm waters of Lake Waccama, beneath a sky of hope and warmth. All the colors of the rainbow, he imagined, would be sailing across the sky if they were freed from this bondage. They ought to be able to dance high above in fully spangled glory and offer their praise to the sweet little Jesus Boy that his mother so often sang about at Christmas. "They would sho know who He was," Ulus dreamed. "They would jine the shepherds and the angels over the barn, too." he added in his ecstasy.

Cotton-picking time, Thanksgiving, Christmas all came to Columbus County and Ulus dreamed on. February came and he hoped that his tenth birthday would release him from his punishment. He had not earned money, besides "mama don't pay you fer doin' the things ya s'pposed to do, no how. Papa would soon yell ef you ask him fer money. 'Sides, we jess ain't got 'nough money fer mah kite, Ah knows that!" His birthday passed by and Aunt Callie did not come around that year. He thought that she and Uncle Henry Freeman would ride by in their old cart and mule with some sweet tea cakes and some meat, but they did not. "Mama said that her brother, Uncle Henry, was too busy eatin his own meat fer the winter

to share any widt chu, chale," Ulus repeated to his brother, Carey.

"Well, jess 'spect nothing from him," replied Carey, "that thar Uncle of yern kin eat three hogs, a bull, three hens and fahve roosters between Christmas and Easter. Mama says she ain't nare seen nothin' lahke it in her lahfe, and she growed up widt him, too."

"Papa tells me," offered Ulus, "that Miss Josephine Freeman takes poak chops 'way from him in Sunday school sometahmes, too."

"Well, hush yo mouth, boy," replied Carey, "you ain't gonna git that thar kite from Aunt Callie no tahme soon. She's gotta spend all her tahme fryin' meat and makin' cone bread fer Uncle Henry Freeman. She ain't got no tahme to meck no kite fer you rihght now, nohow." He moved to his brother's side, hugged him quickly and moved on outside. Ulus sat down near the kitchen table and went off into another one of those protective dreams that a ten-year-old boy puts on to wear many times during a day.

Easter, whose paradox is both its dilemma and its subject, dressed the land all about and folded into a warm Columbus County spring without incident. Every manifestation of mystery and wonder-- that subtle mingling of beauty and ugliness that men passively accept and nature questions in spring--eased on into summer. The streams and the fields had their folksongs in antiphony with the lyrical southern birds. The beauty of the radiant nights tortured and touched the survivors of old Ben Spaulding. They struggled against and submitted to the natural chaos of their lives though they remained acutely unconscious of that disorder. Ulus, however, like all little boys of sensitive natures, rejected that chaos and burst with hysterical joy one day when Aunt Callie delivered his kite. It was perhaps a

moment too momentous to endure, too agonizing to enjoy for long.

All day at school his heart leaped into his throat at unexpected moments. The anticipation was smothering, for all he wanted to do was to jump to his feet and race on home to try out his new kite. He had waited almost an entire year, and now that it was early September and school had begun again he only had thoughts of playing with his new kite. Perhaps he could fly it up to that blood-burning moon, or up to Mars that they studied about last year in class. He could hardly sit still. Then, at times he fell into a trance-like state. He took on the glazed air of a sleep walker, with the look of one of those ghosts his father would dress up like at certain times of the year. He was mindless of time or place during these roaming dreams of another world far beyond the one in which he ate, and drank, went to school and studied his lessons--that real world of inexplicable suffering, punishment, and cruelty.

Finally, the schoolbell rang and the children were dismissed. Ulus raced ahead of the other children, and ran off down the road ahead of his brother, Carey. His heart sang all the way and he kept repeating Grandpa Ben's words when he was happy, "Mah o mahy, Ah'm kickin' hahgh in cotton." The birds all about seemed to join their sweet songs to his inner tunes of mirth and laughter. The sun was hammered to a band of gold overhead. "Pine needles, like mazda" were brilliantly aglow.

He raced into his father's home, dashed into his shared room, thrust open the box in which his kite lay, smiled, cried, and then recovered his shattered nerves. He went outside and saw the bright red kite which he held up before him. It was almost

as light as the air itself. He raced proudly to the open field behind his father's house. He sat down, rewound the ball of string into an old coffee tin he had been saving for the purpose. His movements were gentle and tender. "That's a soft chahle you has," Uncle Henry Freeman used to say to his sister sometimes when Ulus was out of the room. Uncle Henry was never prone to effusive compliments or "I'm sorry" unless absolutely necessary. These were emotions with which he had never contacted during his childhood. Ulus deliciously flavored every moment of this waking dream-come-true. His soft eyes caressed the kite as it lay there on the grass. The very joining of the string with the pinewood that his Aunt Callie had chosen was an act of love.

After three tugs of the string to get the kite airborne and an excessive amount of running even for his sturdy young legs, the kite suddenly caught the wind and surged upward like some "unbodied joy", as the poet described the skylark. The soaring away on high was only equal to the happiness that overwhelmed the boy's soul--that unutterably intoxicating joy to feel the string tugging and to see his kite sailing like some huge scarlet bird in flight. He played out the string and higher and higher it flew up towards the vast and illimitable sky. It swirled and swerved, and sprang up and plummeted, and made symmetrical loops and dives until he thought that his kite would certainly end in disaster. He tugged at it once more very gently whereupon it once again soared high.

Ulus was overcome with happiness in his feeling of power. He pulled this way and tugged that way and the beautiful object above responded to him as he controlled its erratic course.

Then, after one mighty downward swoop like a sinking star, it was suddenly joined by another kite. That kite was a shimmering blue. They dipped together and swayed, stumbling above the earth in some frantic, fluctuating dance. Then they fluttered high in the air like two birds with brilliant plumage as in a fond dance of courtship and romance. Ulus stood transfixed, completely enraptured by the sight overhead. Never in his most frenzied imagination had he expected this to happen. His dreams had always been about one kite and he was grateful to get that one. He had always thought of that one beautiful kite--made by his own Aunt Callie--mounting and sailing high alone against the transparent blue of Columbus County sky. But this act in all of its dramatic intensity enchanted Ulus, for each kite seemed now to vie for supremacy and suddenly there was alarm in Ulus' heart for "over his head he saw trouble in the air," as the spiritual repeated and reechoed in his subconscious.

Ulus glared so intensely up into the sun that the strong light caused spots to form before his eyes. Then sweat ran in tiny rivulets down his face. But absolutely nothing could blind him from the sights above that he would remember all the rest of his days on earth.

Suddenly Ulus heard, "We challenge you red kite," as he turned completely around. His reverie was over and he realized the danger. His handling of chaos was nearly at an end. The grimmest comedy conceivable, the comedy of man's absurd condition in an apparently meaningless world, was thrust upon him. The lawlessness of the real world which lies just below the surface of things suddenly had its own universe, its own orbit, its frightening meaning. Ulus began to cry.

Converging on him from the right was a gang of boys led on by Israel Moore, his cousin. He held a ball of string in his two hands, and looked up at the sky as he ran. Ulus could see the challenging look on his cousin's face as his white teeth gleamed through an opened mouth. "Fahght, fahght, fahght red kite, fahght!" he shouted. "Let's see rahght now who's the king of kites," he added as Rossie Mitchell, Junius Webb, Will Jacobs, and Marion Spaulding shouted supporting words. All of these, his cousins, cheered on as they watched the dogfight over head. Their jaunts and screams became a chant and it beat about Ulus' ears. Their cheers echoed on the wind. Thus chaos resulted all over again from the conflict between natural and social laws. The gang overpowered the individual's quest for happiness.

His cousins had pounded glass into fine pieces. Then they stirred them into melted glue or pasty flour and water. Then they dipped the string into the mixture and left it to dry. After that the crudely sharp string was used to try to cut the string of an enemy's kite in midflight. It was a bonus if the glassy string happened to cut into the opponent's kite paper.

Ulus looked up into the sky, shivered all over, and began to pant in the throes of terror. The blue kite of his cousin was no longer a radiant songster bringing lyrical joy to the spacious sky. It became a vile bird of prey. It bore down on the once lilted red kite with deadly intent. Ulus turned to the natural instinct to escape. He began to run, to pull fiercely, frantically at his string in order to evade the evil challenger. Fear caught in his throat and his breath only came through deep rasping sounds.

His eyes somehow were fastened to the grotesque sight in the sky. It was as though a vicious storm had swept in from the sea as on a summer's day and destroyed the calm and peace of Columbus County.

They danced closer and closer. Ulus' red kite seemed to be taunting and insolently cavorting with the blue kite as if to say ironically, "You are only playing a game with me, aren't you?" And then, as if irresistible to one another they joined in a brief embrace overhead. The gang waved hands over their heads and shouted with fendish glee. Then, the blue and the red kites parted forever.

Ulus Mitchell's string went slack in his hands and chaos surrounded him on all sides. He watched his beloved kite, his precious gift from Aunt Callie, drift slowly away in the distance. The prophecy was at last fulfilled. The blood-red kite, still radiant against the sun and sky, fell onto an old tree that the children had stripped bare the previous spring. The blue kite jeered from above.

Ulus Mitchell had lost his dream. With the growing awareness that must smite the young sooner or later during their slow and painful ascent into adulthood, Ulus began to realize what dreams really are. Far finer and more delicate than porcelain Oriental china, far brighter than a flower that soars upward on a stem, more fragile than a butterfly seeking the moon, his dreams had been made of tears and hope, of life's expectations. Numb with sadness and aching all over, Ulus stood in the middle of the field oblivious to the scornful cheers of his cousins. He realized the emptiness of loss. It was at that moment he recalled in later years that so much of his innocence left him.
