

The Corncob Pipe  
by Louis Mitchell

The day was a chilly one for Columbus County, North Carolina, even for this time of year. Although the first frost had come and had made the collards sweet, this particular Sunday morning seemed to be more penetrating than usual for an otherwise mild climate. The bright sun, which for all its brilliant light gave little heat, still hung low in the bright blue sky. Winter had come as severely as it ever comes to this flat and sandy area. Yet it did not keep people from attending church. The horses and buggies were strung up at the long post in front of St. Japh's Baptist Church, and, inside, the church was full.

Rev. Zachariah George Moore stood erect in front of the congregation. His grayish black hair, - what there was left of it, - lay brushed tightly back and away from his sloping forehead. A bead of perspiration slid down towards his left eye as both the heat from so many bodies crowded together and the anxiety of his own inner disappointment closed in upon him. No one had come forward during the invocation hymn, "O, What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The congregation had not responded to Rev. Moore's sermon

and he could not tell why.

On the other hand, old Uncle Currie Randolph Spaulding was a bit annoyed and disappointed when, after the hymn books had been put back on the racks, the benediction did not immediately follow. He had stood up, taking the benediction absolutely for granted. With his right arm he fumbled behind him for his tawdry, shabby overcoat. He trembled all over but in his blue eyes there was that determination of mind that commands events to proceed without further ado. Uncle Currie was ready to hear *The* benediction, grab <sup>bed</sup> his overcoat, and head <sup>ed</sup> for home.

"Lawd ha/ mercy," said Uncle Currie, as he felt the hand of his fourth wife tuggin'/nervously at his elbow for him to sit down. "What in all creation is you doin' to me, woman? Ah wants this hyar service ober. Ah's plum tuckered out."

Uncle Currie was annoyed with her now, too, which was not unusual. He usually was annoyed with her for one thing or another. He never thought of the present Mrs. Spaulding as anything except his "fourth" wife. He often reminded Roberta, himself, and others, - if they happened to be about, - that he had had other and better wives. But he told himself now that he had learned patience with his ninety-two years and, exhausted as he was, he protested minutely, sat down shakily, looked scoldingly at this ebony-colored fourth wife of his, and grunted.

He fumbled across his chest with his right hand at the still warm corn-cob pipe in his pocket. He liked even the feel of it. Except in church, or when he was sleeping; Uncle Currie never allowed his old pipe to rest. It was either in his right hand or in his mouth, - smoking away, dropping ashes



everywhere possible. "Ah sweah every stich o' clothes that man has got holes in 'em," Roberta would mutter. "Cain't do a dern thing 'bout it. That's the truth." Her only confidant, the only person she could complain to was her sister. "Ah trahs and Ah trahs," Roberta would tell her, "but, honey, thars jess no doin' with that man. He treats me wrong, but Ah reckon Ah loves him."

Unless people shouted into his right ear Uncle Currie could not hear at all. His bright eyes were still quick, however, and his temper still easily aroused. His crop of white bushy hair was still thick. His negroid nose was tainted with pipe smoke, his fingers stained. His somewhat Scandinavian mouth and rather fair complexion completed a picture which told the story of the racial mixture of Columbus County.

Uncle Currie's feet had gone exceedingly cold, as they usually did when he stood or sat still for a long while in a single place. He wiggled his big toes in his country boots but his feet were no warmer because of the effort.

Because of his ailments, - those that come with age and those that come with being contrary, - he had kept away from church a good deal recently. For how many Sundays, he had no idea. He told everyone that his remaining at home was one of those notions of "these hyar new doctors. Ah declare, they goes fur in school but they ain't worth nary a cent." He followed their advice, however, but one thing he would not do: he would not stop smoking that old corncob pipe.

As he sat there next to his fourth wife, he thought that he did recall that recently a small group of folks, - most of them relatives, - came to his home to intercede for his presence this particular Sunday. He

could not remember why, if they had told him, but he figured that "'twas 'bout tahme to go to the Lawd's house, anyway. Guess Ah'll do as they want even though, Lawd knows, Ah don't feel lahke a 'am Ah born to dah'."

His old mind traced after this recollection with the ardor of a squirrel in quest of hidden nuts. As arduously as he tried to remember why they wanted him to come, the more his memory failed him. Suddenly, with those alert blue eyes Uncle Currie observed something Rev. Moore was doing. He watched this distant relative, who had been in the church less than thirty years, which was a blink of the eye to Uncle Currie, mount the rostrum. (It was said that he had gone off for four years to be educated, but Uncle Currie had always had a sneaking suspicion that he had actually run off with some no account woman.) He never thought much of anyone very young, and he never thought much of Rev. Moore. In fact, now he winced with a bit of resentment since Rev. Moore did not go up the stairs as a reverent man ought to, or at least as Uncle Currie thought he should. Rev. Moore climbed over the little curtain rod and threw himself up and over while catching hold of the edge of the pulpit. He steadied himself, then stood erect.

Rev. Moore pushed out his already protruding stomach, flung his clerical robe back, and thrust his fingertips into his vest pockets. Obviously, though Uncle Currie couldn't hear what it was, the minister said something to entertain the children and the women down front because Uncle Currie saw many a snicker and giggle. His brother, Richard, had once told him that things always appeared funnier in church than anywhere else, but Uncle Currie did not find this very amusing. In fact, he said to himself in a contrary mood, "Ain't that down rahght ugly and hateful



fo' a preacher to do in the Lawd's house. Sho think he kin do better by us folks than makin' jokes fo' the chillun. By Lawd, Ah wouldn't care ef his church burned down. Don't lakke his ways nary a bit. Ain't first tahme Ah seen that thar preacher make a fool out of hisself whahle trahin' to give glory to the Lawd. Even at his age he still lubs them women an' all them thar chillun. Lawd, Lawd ha' mercy on our souls."

In spite of Uncle Currie's prejudice, it was not Rev. Moore's fault. There was a huge basket, made by the women of the church, sitting near the wood stove in the sight of the entire congregation. The laugh had occurred when the preacher leaned over and, with his natural flair for the dramatic, set the basket down on the sacrament table. Now he leaned forward like a young pine in the wind, resting his enormous bulk against the pulpit. He smiled and collected himself. For some reason, his thoughts carried him back to his first wife, Marianna Freeman. Marianna had been converted to Catholicism and always, even after having married the North Carolina preacher, she continued to call this piece of furniture not the sacrament table, but "the altar." "I guess she learned all that stuff in New York," the minister thought to himself. "I never could break her of that habit. Well...at least, she did die a Christian."

The large basket was no customary thing to see on the sacrament table. But everyone around knew that Rev. Moore was prone to uncustomary ways, especially in church, and it was not merely a matter of flirting with the women and charming the children. At a signal from the minister, the organist, Miss Arabella Mitchell, one of Uncle Currie's nieces, stood up from where she was sitting with the choir, and moved towards the organ.

Uncle Currie who, after the basket antics, dismissed the preacher as being more childish than religious (it never occurred to him that the preacher could be both), now shifted his quick eyes to the gait of his niece.

"Sho is a perdy woman," he said to himself, "jess lahke her mother, mah oldest sister's chahld. Mahght hab married her ef she weren't mah own niece. Sho woulda gibben folks somethin' to talk 'bout."

Miss Mitchell moved delicately across the rostrum, slid wistfully across the bench, and bent foward with her hands in her lap, ready for the preacher's direction to begin playing.

Uncle Currie's mind wandered again, - long expanses of attention were never one of his gifts to begin with. Now that ninety years had begun to weigh on his mind, his moments of attention, - unless driven by a purpose, - were short and quickly forgotten. At this moment of quietude, having enjoyed seeing his niece, he was reminded of his first wife. She was his most beloved wife, and within a few seconds he shut his narrow eyes and was lost in a dream of Lily Anne Lowry from Robeson County coming from the old smoke house with ham on her shoulder. He always thought of her as Ruth from the Old Testament, sweet, beautiful, and merciful. When she reached him, she rested against the handles of his plow. Beads of perspiration rolled down from her coal-black hair across her Lombee Indian face. She rolled her soft gray eyes at him and kissed his cheek before she moved on to the one-storeyed white farm house. She had died after twenty years of marriage, bearing Uncle Currie two girls, who now were both married and living in New York, and two boys, who were so fair of complexion that they had served with the white troops during the war against Germany. "Sho 'nough," Uncle Currie used to say, "they sho weren't no colored chillun."



Miss Roberta, on the other hand, who now sat next to him in church, who had become his fourth wife, who had loved him, fed him, washed him, and cared for him during these most feeble years, was the blackest-faced person in the community. (Uncle Currie, long before this fourth marriage, had once vowed that "Ah'd nebber marry one of them thar Nigger women," showing that in the final analysis no one could escape being a victim of the prejudices engendered by slavery. The economic system of slavery had poisoned nearly all it touched with color-consciousness.)

Unfortunately, at this time, Uncle Currie could not hear what Rev. Moore was saying. Otherwise, he would have come back from his delightful dream immediately. The preacher had finished cajoling the women and children. He was slightly peeved that they had all forgotten that he had asked them last week to bring some extra wood for the stove this particular Sunday because he was going to keep them in church a little bit over-time for a special occasion. Doubtless much of his annoyance, though, was brought on by the lack of response to his not-too-well-prepared message this cool morning. He had not lived up to his or his congregation's standard and he sought an object or person to blame.

The half-frown on Rev. Moore's reddish face faded away and a gentle smile reappeared in its place as he started to talk about old Uncle Currie. The people of this tightly knit congregation turned their bodies around, - the more modest craned their necks, - in their pews to look at the old man. Uncle Currie sat head and shoulders above his fourth wife and the other men and women around him. His blue eyes remained shut and a look of "coming for to carry me home" covered his sallow face.

Rev. Moore smiled again and said, "I'm now going to ask Sister Mitchell to start playing that good old spiritual, 'I Will Trust in the Lord Till I Die,' While she plays I want you all to pray, then sing as only you can do. Then the Usherboard women will pass the hats around for your offerings. Folks, I want to see bills. Coins are fine gifts from them that have but little, but for you folks who feel you can contribute more, don't hold back. We need a new church; we are going to have a new church very soon if you are generous. No, don't hold back, brothers and sisters, and don't be afraid. The Lord will take care of everyone of his children somehow and someway. I know and you know, sisters and brothers, that old Uncle Ben Spaulding is going to donate the land for our new church. All we need is the money to buy the materials. We need that money right now, and it's up to you and me." Rev. Moore went on, almost chanting his plea, looking occasionally at Uncle Currie. It had been Rev. Moore's idea that his relatives bring Uncle Currie to church this morning. Rev. Moore was full of new ideas, and he thought that he had hit upon a fine way of inspiring the community to be generous in his plea for money for a new church.

Uncle Currie stirred; he opened his eyes and he felt the rumble of the organ on the floor and on his cold feet. He knew something was going on. He nervously fumbled for his corncob pipe, forgetting for the moment that he was not supposed to smoke in church. He wanted so much to pull it out and light it up even here but he dared not. It was still warm and that made the temptation worse. He felt his matches in his righthand pocket but refrained, saying to himself, "Lawd ha' mercy, Ah'd jess lub a smoke rahght now, but Ah cain't in church, dern it. Great day in the moanin', when will



this hyar preacher eber stop. Ah's tahred and nerbous already now."

"There's a man in this church today," Rev. Moore was saying, meanwhile, "whose very presence moves my heart to tears of inspiration. I'm sure that the sight of him moves you, too."

Everyone knew the minister meant Uncle Currie.

"He's come here many times. He helped break the ground when this old church was built. He was here and with his own hands, yes, with his own hands, brothers and sisters, he helped raise the first frame of this old board church when it was put on this ground. He saw loved ones laid to rest in the shadow of this building, and he was certainly here to help to lay the cornerstone as his father, old Melton Spaulding of sainted memory stood and watched. His body has grown feeble, his hearing has almost gone, and his sons and daughters have gone off and contributed to God's kingdom. But he has remained a faithful servant of his Master and this old church. Thank God he's still here with us! He is a tribute to God's gift of life. I've already asked the older folks of the congregation if it would be all right for Uncle Currie to come here this Sunday morning and help us raise some money for the new church. All you relatives and friends have helped to bring him here and that has made me happy. Let's ask Sister Roberta, his wife, to ask Uncle Currie to come forward and end our service with an old-time-religion prayer."

Fourth-wife, Roberta, stood up next to her second husband, placed her mouth close to his good ear, and shouted the message. Because the organist, his niece, had continued playing the hymn, she had to shout the message three times. However, he finally understood. The old man smiled appreciatively and began to amble forward with his wife just be-

hind him. And as Uncle Currie moved forward, Rev. Moore continued explaining his plan.

"This man is here at quite a risk to his health. You must admire him for that. But he was always a man who lived in the house of the Lord. Brothers and sisters, pray right where you are as he comes this way. Sister Mitchell, please play, 'Sweet Hour of Prayer,' as we sing and pray respectfully for the new church, for this fine old man who is coming forward, as we worship the Lord, and give him our offerings. You should look on the figure of Uncle Currie, our beloved Uncle Currie, and be deeply inspired. If any of you can remain unmoved by the faith of a child which this man possesses, your hearts, my brothers and sisters, must be made of stone. He'll pray with all of us once the ushers have passed the baskets again and emptied them in this huge basket here on the sacrament table. We want to fill it up to the top, brothers and sisters. Yes, to the very top. That is why Uncle Currie has come today. He wants you to fill this basket with offerings for the house of the Lord. Yes, in a minute I am going to ask Uncle Currie to lead us in prayer and song and even while he is talking, if you are moved to give more than you have already, come forward and do so and the Lord will bless you that much more. Yes, yes, God will pay you back tenfold because you have helped Him and His church. This man, our dear Uncle Currie, is giving all he has. Why don't you do the same? May the Lord have mercy on your souls and bless you and keep you in His good graces forever and ever." Then, more quietly, the minister said, "Will you please help us, Deacon Brother Alexander Spaulding. He's your cousin, I know."

Cousin Alexander Spaulding, no young man himself, began singing as Miss Mitchell pumped up, 'Sweet Hour of Prayer,' and began helping Uncle



Currie up the aisle. "He's a good man," Uncle Currie thought to himself, as he walked by his side, "but some of that thar money's gone to his haid. He's fifteen years younger than me but it hadn't neber got 'im anywhar at all with Lily Anne, mah first and only sweetheart. It ain't go him anywhars with any woman, 'specially not with his wahfe, Susanna Blanks. No one knows nothin' 'bout what come of that Campbell girl he first married in New York City. Ah reckon she's eitheer daid or livin' in sin in New Jersey. Them Northern folks is all no good. Lawdie, don't know what the worl' is comin' to."

He looked over the several heads as he moved slowly foward. "Great day in the moanin'," he said to himself, "thar's Elmer Green and Pearse Moore, and Roland Graham. Ain't seen them in a mess o' yars. Ah remembers them thar boys good. Ah used to warn them 'bout gittin' in mah bacca fields. Then they'd go, Ah declare, an' git in mah melons. Ah'd warn 'em good again. It didn't make no difference. They neber paid me no mahnd. Now they's deacons. Guess Ah'd better say a few things to these hyar folks. Besahdes, sooner Ah says mah prayer, the sooner Ah can go home."

Finally, Deacons Spaulding and Graham led the old man to the front and let go of him. He stood for a moment between the sacrament table and the woodstove, weaving slightly and looking about as if he needed to gather some strength. He touched his corncob pipe, - which for him was a talisman, like a rabbit's foot, - took it out, filled it, but, remembering again that he shouldn't smoke in the Lord's house, he put it back into his pocket. He felt the vibration of the organ as Miss Mitchell placed her slender, angular hands on the keys and struck up, 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord."

Uncle Currie was a bit confused. He wondered whether he was supposed to give thanks to the Lord for the bread and the wine. "Ain't it late for sacrament tahme," he said to himself. "Ah thought we already done that." Someone pushed past him and he opened his eyes wider. It was little Aggie Mitchell. His son had been sweet on her once. Then he saw Maimie Jacobs slide by, then that ornery old Miss Letcy Mitchell abruptly swept past. They seemed to be weeping and putting something in the big basket. "Lawd knows these folks is crazy. It sho ain't for sacrament tahme that they done brought me down hyar. An' what's that basket doin' on the table? Lawd ha' mercy and tell me now what am Ah supposed to pray fur? Shall Ah pray fur vict'ry or fur peace or fur rain in tahme o' drought? Ah jess don't know. Wait'll Ah get that fourth wahfe o' mahne home! Puttin' me in this hyar position! Ah'll beat 'er fo' not tellin' me rahaght. 'Spose Ah could pray fur a better fahre; mah feets is col'. Well, Ah'll pray fur guidance, that's always safe to pray fur."

He brought his trembling hands together so that they touched at the fingertips. He began to pray. He felt the organ vibrations grow and saw the many hands clapping in front of him. He saw several heads nodding, "Yes, Lord," and "Tell 'em, brother," and he knew that he had more to speak about than the indefinite subject of guidance. He prayed joyously, loudly, and for a long while words and phrases he had not used in many years came to his lips, and he shouted them out. He could see the people move about in front of him and he could taste the salt of his own tears. He could not stop: "...Lawd gibe us peace, and guidance in the



sahght of fear and worriation. Lawd, stay with us when our hearts are low and when our sorrows are deep. Lawd, lead us into rahghteousness. Lawd, grant us the peace o' Thah goodness and the hope of our future tahme with you in yo' Golden Kingdom. Make our paths go strahght an' may we dwell in the House of the Lawd fo'eber an' fo'eber. Take mah han', precious Lawd. Lead me on, let me stan'. Ah am weak, Ah am tahred."

He shouted as the others quickened the rhythm of the hymn Miss Mitchell had started. Uncle Currie had no idea what the congregation was singing but he went on shouting, to everyone's joy and elation. As his prayers grew stronger, his voice increased in volume. The spirit was rising to howling levels. The entire congregation kept passing by him on its way to the basket, but he only saw their shadows through his tear-dimmed eye-lids. He did not notice the dropping of the money in the basket which was rapidly filling up. It had confused him at first, but he was so happy and his heart was so full that he no longer took notice. He quoted lines and entire passages from Genesis, from Job, from the Psalms, from Proverbs, and then he recited the entire Sermon on the Mount from his childhood memory. He prayed about the loss of his dear sweet Lily Anne. He said that he did not feel old or sick anymore. He asked God to bless the church and all the congregation. His "halleluiahs" became more and more frequent. His voice rose once again as he opened his eyes and saw everyone, smiling, weeping, clapping, singing, answering his words on their knees. "Halleluiah!" he shouted. "Amen! Halleluiah, Amen! Praise the Lawd! Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus! Praise the Lawd! Amen, amen, praise the Lawd and peace and mercy will follow you all the days of your

lahfe! Praise the Lawd, all you chillun!" He touched his heart, and he began to cry again, and then he began to clap hands in rhythm as he finished with the end of the twenty-third psalm, "...an' Ah will dwell in the house of the Lawd fo'ever and fo'ever, Amen!"

Uncle Currie stood there happier than he had been in many years. He was deeply moved, he was almost dizzy with happiness. He clutched his corncob pipe. He could see that the entire congregation was in a frenzy of religious devotion. He was so happy, so moved. Unconsciously, he brought out his pipe in one hand; unconsciously, he took out a match with the other, struck it on the seat of his pants, and lit his pipe, puffing it with content, closing his eyes, and, with an idle wave of his aged hand, tossing the still-burning match into the basket on the sacrament table, which immediately burst into flames, to the shock and horror of the congregation and the overwhelming amazement of Rev. Moore.

Uncle Currie closed his eyes, and, oblivious to the fire blazing up behind him, shouted, "Praise the Lawd, all you chillun! Have faith in the Lawd and He will prováhde!"