

INTRODUCTION

In the 1920's when my mother and father left Columbus County, North Carolina and ventured northward, they most probably cried out upon reaching the vast and exciting expanses of New York City, "It's a brave new world." They were very much like Shakespeare's Miranda who uttered these words before, in that they felt they had just beheld humanity and the world in which that species lived and died for the first time. They had lived their lives in the quiet and soil-soaked surroundings of an agrarian area whose inhabitants were relatives two or three times over. They had left the warm embraces of not only kith and kin but also the sweet assurance that comes with having been land-locked and culture bound, where tradition and Calvinism had manifested themselves for nearly two centuries. They knew of the original Ben Spaulding and Zay Mitchell -- both free issues from slavery and that kind of cruel psychology. They had learned to walk, to till, and to demand production from a hot, sulky climate which bore down on sandy yet cotton and tobacco-producing soil. They had accepted their free heritage in which three races mingled their blood with both love and lust and had come forth as God-fearing and hard-working people. They had known very little of the visitudes and vehemence of slavery and all that that onus has burdened this nation with over the years. They had known segregation and had unwisely practiced their own form of it themselves. They had copied western ways and manners and hardly knew that they were doing so both for their betterment and their worsening. It was only a question of time when

they would become the Miranda of the American Tempest, the slightly disillusioned ones. It was only after short years when they discovered as Alice did, that things were not as they seemed.

My mother often told me in later years that her tutors in ideology were simply the magicians and story-tellers of our heritage; it was only a short while after arriving in the north that she concluded she and her husband ought not to have ventured so far away from the protection of those household gods of uncles, aunts and cousins, and the ghosts and fairies of such places as Lake Waccamaw, St. James Baptist Church and Mitchell Field Cemetary. She often said that it was a frightening moment when she discovered as she grew to be a woman in the north that the world is not brave or new but somewhat intractable. She and her husband never lost hope and faith in those who inhabited that new world in which they found themselves and the old world from which they had departed -- for I cannot remember a moment when we were not in touch with those honey-suckled roots of Columbus County -- but my parents were Miranda, for sure, having a sixth look at reality. Under the spells of an innocent and country Prospero, they thought families should be able to live in peace and tranquility side by side. A few huffs and puffs, and all evil and prejudice should go away. Honor and decency -- through which people treated each other as they wanted to be treated -- were ever dreams. Greed, hunger, and cruelty should disappear, and God should be in his heaven and love should be right with the world. Strangely and happily, they never lost the essence of that gentle outlook of which

love is the root.

Unhappily, the world did not behave as they had hoped it would in the north. They could not have known that before they came. Nor could they have scarcely known that bombs and blasts, spit and foul words would be cast around and that they and their children would receive indelible scars. They could hardly have known that their offers of peace and justice would be greeted by hostility and subsequent hatred. But they never lost faith with those whom their God had created in His own image. They only dreamed of going home -- without having done so except for short and long visits. They never truly considered giving up, uprooting their children again and their hopes for their family. They never lost faith in their entrenched southern roots in sun-lit Columbus County which old Ben Spaulding had so courageously planted in the eighteenth century. Somehow, Mama and Papa concluded in their simple ways that it was no bad thing for Miranda to have a sixth look at the world, because the sixth look was reality. At the same time, it was melancholy to see the dream fall and disintegrate as the glistening stars of reality rose. But then, the education of parents and their children, like the wonder of Miranda, takes place in front of all to see.

One afternoon -- and it was during my fourth decade on this earth -- I was busily looking for some old notes I had stacked away in several boxes of papers. I cannot recall exactly what I was looking for -- probably some Milton queries, some trivia about Alexander Pope, some bits about Mozart, or

some precious thoughts about Phillis Wheatley, Emily Dickinson, or Duke Ellington, when I happened upon a tattered old box of papers. I opened the filthy thing and discovered to my own amazement, a stifling amount of dust. I pushed my hands down into the box out of sheer curiosity, and pulled out a few stacks of braille paper and began to read. It was surely difficult at first since the paper was old, chipping, crumbling, and shaving from both years and confinement. I was delighted, perhaps enchanted by what I could scarcely make out on the crackling pages. I had found my own Dead Sea Scrolls, in a sense, for they were some stories that I had once bothered to write down. They were my own childhood jottings about the old stories that my mother and father used to go about telling us either at night-time, during meals, or during reprimands or sermons on a number of church affairs, or about good, proper, and decent behavior expected of young boys and girls. I was at that moment happy that I had bothered to write down, even in my own crude way in not the best of braille writing, those funny, sad, terrifying, and often awe-packed stories, sketches, and anecdotes they used to tell us about our kinfolk down in Columbus County, North Carolina.

I cannot recall now the number of hours I spent there near that closet, spellbound as I read my own childish accounts of the old familiar citizens of our past. They all came running back through my memory. There was Old Man Will Jacobs, Old Man Will Moore, Uncle Abe Banks, nasty Old Uncle Ben Chessfire Spaulding, Uncle Henry Freeman, the "eatingest man on earth," as Mama used to say; Uncle George Mitchell, the "stingiest man

on earth," as Papa used to say (whom Mama would interrupt by saying, "Ulus, you mean the meanest man on earth"); Aunt Mary who used to slam the door on her own nose so poor was her sight; Aunt Callie who not only had the longest feet you ever did see, but preached about visiting the sick and the dying; Aunt Penny Spaulding who married Uncle Lonny Mitchell and hence a lifetime of drinking and carrying on; Uncle Jack Spaulding the horse dealer; industrious John Wesley Spaulding; the vigorously amorous John Wesley Mitchell; the righteous Lee Webb; Uncle Israel Moore's death out there near the Spaulding road; Sandy Plains Baptist Church, Rehobeth and St. James Baptist Church; how Shady Grove burned down; how Miss Josephine Freeman must have taught everyone in the community (Mama used to say "That woman was forever"); how Uncle McIver Spaulding had to have been the ugliest man in Columbus County, according to Aunt Birdie Mitchell; how Dr. Aaron McDuffie Moore went up there in Durham with C.C. Spaulding; and how Uncle Flyod Freeman would preach and testify at Sandy Plains Baptist Church when "he got notion to talk," as Mama used to say, "Oh Lord have mercy." These all crossed under my fingers as I read and flashed across my imagination as I smiled, alternately shed a tear, and laughed heartily. Not only was my soul moved to wonder and ponder all of these past events and people -- how they lived, loved, laughed, longed, felt and died -- but my imagination was awakened to delight.

I realised at that moment that these were fading treasures beneath my hands because they were a written symbol of some precious things that had happened to a people during a fleeting

but meaningful period of an experient with culture and history. In their scripture-glutted ways, they were rich and high-principled about relationships, justice, and cleanliness. I also realised how vivid and rich Mama and Papa had been in their imaginations in telling us these stories over the years. They had not distinguished carefully, like primitive man, between fact and supposition, or between symbolism and literal truth. They had no brand-new words recently snatched from Latin or Greek to describe some wondrous medical or technological invention. They had not abstract vocabulary. Uncle Ben Spaulding was nasty, and Uncle George Mitchell was onery, and those were concrete and philosophical statements. They knew that they had to make pictures to convey their ideas. They used their Bibles and what few books they had available to do so, and to find out the answers to questions -- questions of the universe, the creation, the yield of the fields, the mystery of the swamps, ponds and Lake Waccamaw. They knew of their origins very confidently and were delighted in that security. Yet, through their pride of heritage and certainty of direction, they had the sweet innocence of children who entreat their parents to divulge the hidden meaning of things. They, too, grew disillusioned as were to do, when they grew to learn that neither their parents, nor teachers, nor preachers could ever divulge those impenetrable things.

My parents knew the Bible stories and could tell and relate them exceedingly well. They could follow their courses from the picturesque and the altogether imaginative myth down to what journalists call today "a story." But they could not -- and indeed, it never occurred to them to do so -- analyze plot,

point of view, characterization, climax, denouement, or story-line. They only knew that something happened, someone did something to or for someone else and no matter what, it was true. The element that was in common about all that they told us was that they were tales. Their stories came down to us by means of a slowly rhythmic tradition. I learned later that each of their different sorts of tales, stories, anecdotes, and sketches may be true in a certain sense and each may be quite untrue in another sense. Even history can give a wrong impression. I can remember how Mama would interrupt Papa by saying, "Now Ulus, you just aren't telling that story right true like." Papa would reply by saying, "Woman! What the hen fire are you talkin' about? You weren't even 'round when Old Man Sam Blanks told me and my mule that story."

One common element of a good story, however, was ever present in their sharing of both myths and legends; it was delight of our imagination. They knew that there was truth in their myths -- truths of personality, place, of ethical relationships, and of religious aspirations to go "over Jordan" and to "Have a closer walk with Thee." Although they did not know that the early chapters of genealogies in Genesis are an attempt to show the origins of tribes and nations, they instinctively knew their own tradition, their roots, an ethical standard, and a poetic history. About these happenings and people there might have been more facts to tell and doubtless true ones, but whether their myths were creations of facts out of ideas, or their legends sought ideas in facts, was unimportant. They wanted to pass on a Heritage to their children. They wanted to teach lessons. They wanted to share life with

us, and above all they wanted to entertain us through the thanksgiving in which we always felt the security that we were theirs and they were grateful to the Lord for that.

My mother was pretty, sweet, yet firm and persistent. She was persuasive and ever certain that God was the designer of her life with Jesus looking over her shoulder. God was a living substance. She was confident, as Gloucester became, that affliction would cry out eventually, "enough, enough, and die." She poetically managed to temper the gentleness of Ruth with the kindness of Joseph, while at the same time she was practical, determined, and sometimes wilfully inflexible. She was sure of her stance and often pleaded for what she had wrought in justice and unswerving love. She gave abundantly, was often hurt by disappointments and insincerity. It was her unbending belief in the underlying beauty in mankind and the art that it brings forth that kept her in tune with the Christ that she often called upon for help and for her own form of defiance. Yes, she often told her Jesus -- and father confidently at that -- that she thought He was wrong. But, like the rest of us, Mama underneath it all, hoped for the best. Her stories about our folks always revealed those traits, for her reports were never cynical, derisive, or even detracting. She loved her people, lived for them, and next to God worshipped her ancestry.

My father, handsome, with the hands of an artist and the work ethic of a laborer, was as loving as Hosea, as simple as Peter, and as free as Ali Baba. He never discussed his narrative inspiration any more than he analyzed his southern accent. He would merely titter, tell one of us that we were

acting like Old Man Will Jacobs if we were being mean, or that we were as flighty as Uncle Lloyd Mitchell. Then he would giggle and start one of his stories about some one in his family experience -- everyone was kith and kin, of course, and we would like this as, indeed, we liked him without admitting in so many words that he had a contagious sense of humor. There were other uncles and cousins, and aunts who had good senses of humor we thought, but Papa's was kind and infectious. He never played with what he told as gospel truth, but he punctuated his tales with snickers, giggles, and often with open hysteria. Mama used to say that he broke up into gales of laughter at these moments because he had just invented a new twist to the truth. It might have been so. I do not know. I shall never know. His contagious laughter might have come at that moment in the folkloric narrative when fact is tainted by a good deal of the purely imaginative. But all of this goes into the making of a good story, and Papa had that talent innately. His stories unfolded so spontaneously that we hardly knew that we were being informed about a large number of things. But information was not his primary reason for spinning his yarn; His appeal was to our emotions rather than to our reason. He would never allow imagination to lapse into wonder or distraction as he pressed his tale onward and forward to a sad or hilarious conclusion. Neither argument nor logical explanations took hold of him during these exciting moments and the situations he brought back to life aroused immediate love or hate, pleasure or anger, peace or excitement, admiration or disgust, pity or fear. He never stopped to reason why his characters did what they did, therefore he never judged them.

But we knew that we were being duly entertained by a masterful weaver of tales of woe, of hilarity, of rustic conning, of bucolic trickery, of hopeless love, and of family joking. His rhythm was perfect. The change of speakers, the imitated dialogue, and chuckle while describing a face or a gesture, the arrival of a new person on the scene, the righteous indignation of an onlooker, what public opinion amounted to according to his people's cultural demands, always contributed to the gradual movement toward the climax in which chaos was somewhat ordered into shape. His were artistic oral productions and at the end of his tale, anecdote, legend, story, or myth we had to gasp or smile, feeling that we had been in another world where we had seen people whom we grew to know.

I emptied my large box of dusty narratives -- I found my first braille slate at the bottom of the box, too, one that my godmother, Miss Butler, gave to me -- and I decided upon the spot to type them out and give them some kind of a literary structure. The aim was to keep them as close to the version I had been given as a young boy when I had the mind to jot them down. I knew that I would only capture some of the spirit of those curious Columbus County Tales, for my father and mother have gone on to other concerns of the soul, and they have taken their oral talents with them. I suppose it is because the emotions are intangible and the reporting of them and what happens to them is the reason why writers are necessary. Be that as it may, although I have given these tales, sketches, anecdotes, and stories some shape, having changed the names often enough -- we are all related to the

original Spauldings, Moores, Mitchells, and Freemans whatever our surnames just happened to be -- I have tried to remain faithful to the flavor and the spirit of our country tradition. If I have been able to do so, then I have extended and passed on that which was so gracefully and generously given to me by those who truly cared about what happened to their fellowman. If I have failed, then I have not been faithful to those who went beyond with the hope that they had not passed this way in vain. And so, let it suffice to say that whatever they told me during those youthful days they did so with true love. That kind of love never spoiled anybody that I know of.