

THE DAWN BROKE TWICE

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Lofton Freeman, after it was all over, probably wished that he could, like the woman in the parable who found her lost coin and could call her friends and neighbors and say come and rejoice with me because I found that which I lost. But he could not. He might have wished, like the shepherd who when he had recaptured the one hundredth sheep could go to the rest of the village and say I found it. But alas, Lofton Freeman could not, for he never found out what really happened. Did someone play a most dastardly trick on him?

Old Christmas, January 6th, came twelve days after the New Christmas and for Lofton Freeman, his wife, Pet, and their children, it was a very important and meaningful holiday. Lofton was particularly avid about his belief that one could always judge the weather by those twelve days. "Everyday single days tells urs folks whut kahnd'a weather thar would be in the comin' yiar," Pet would affirm. The children would rejoice loudly both in and out of school because it seemed to mean more days of fun and play, eating sweets, and decorating the home.

Lofton kept a calendar of his very own from year to year in order to prove that if the first day in January was warm, the rest of January would contain some fine days. If it was chilly, rainy, or even snowy, what little it snowed in Columbus County, North Carolina, Lofton and Pet were convinced that such would be the nature of January. Being that they never looked at their book from one Christmas to another, ever depending upon their memories and such would affirm their conclusions, it was not important that their records be kept straight. Their records were something that they insisted upon holding up to teach their children—something they felt impelled to teach their children from the start. In addition to all of this, Pet and Lofton could never understand, it was against their superstitious natures to do so—why folks took this eve, the day before the 6th of January to play pranks and practical jokes on one another.

They forbade their children to participate in collard stealing, robbing washpots, throwing manure in people's doors, shooting guns into the air, and overturning outhouses.



Lofton often told the frightening story to his children of a ghost he saw one night while walking on the Whitehall Road. It was hunting season and night time was the finest moment for shooting rabbits. He happened to be with a few of his cousins, George and Walter Jacobs on one side and Millard Mitchell on the other. They were all joking when, "Suddenly", as Lofton would tell it, "Thar was one of them thar big yaller lights comin' towards urs a-bobbin' and a-weavin' from one sahde of the road to the other. Ol' Millard, he done had the biggest mouth and biggest voice too, called out the loudest."

"That thars's Ol' Man Carl Spaulding who is in fer some playin'."

"Well ef it is," answered Walter Jacobs, "Thar ain't no answer from him. Ah'm levlin' mah gun raght now. Ah ain't taken no chances."

"Then George shot his own rifle first," said Lofton, "and chillun that thar thing busted into so many flames and then disappeared. Don't know we was lahke the scared rabbits. We done run off down the road with Millard winning the race, 'course. When he's was real scared lahk, thar wasn't nobody in Columbus County that could out run that man, sho 'nough, not a soul."

"But whut would happen to the ghosts?" the children would ask.

"Thar ain't no tellin'" replied Lofton. "It goes to show you that thar's God in heaven, and then thar's ghost, too. You'd better b'leive me, chillun when Ah tells you that thar's sperts in this hiar world!"

Now Pet Freeman was not far behind in her contribution to the world of superstition and ghosts. Every time she had a chance she would toss out a list or two to her children, to her friends, to her relatives--and they were many-- and to her church women groups. "Ef the Mama has got heartburn," she would offer, for baby superstitions were her chief interest, "you kin bet rahght thar soon that thar baby will be bohn with a lot of hair, as show as Ah'm settin' hiar on this stool. Then Granma Jane Spaulding done told me severl tahmes that a Mama show oght'a be raght careful 'bout whut she looks at or her baby show will be marked. Granma saw a fahre one tahme and sho 'nough when Ulus was bohn, he done had a red mark on his face. You better listen to whut Ah'm tellin' you, chillun. An Ah knows



from real experience that ef you tahkes a small bag of asafetida 'round a chald's nake it sho will keep fever away. Tells you though, sisters, Ah ain't taken no chances when Ah sees one of mah uoung'uns gettin' real bilious-lahke, he gits a good dose of empsom salts, caster oil or some sassafras tea. Then in the spring each chale gits a real spring cleanin' with some selphur and molasses and some sugar and terpentahne. When any of mah chillun gits the runs Ah jess prepares the liquid from some boiled balckberry vine fer an hour or more. That chald gits a tablespoon every hour. And mah favorite suggestion fer Mamas with new babies is that when you washes that baby's skin with lah soap it's sho bound to have nahce smooth skin. And remember, too, ef your baby sucks on his thumb too much that not only is bad luck, it means his teeth is goinna fall out one day."

Winter had been dark, cold, and difficult one particular year in the lives of the Freemans. Pet had mentioned her bad luck all during November. Lofton spoke of the poor yield of his crops and said that it might have been because one of his children had broken a mirror or because his brother, George, had walked under a ladder just after Thanksgiving. "Pet and me was paintin' the kitchin and George done walked under a ladder just a'fer Ah could git to him. Didn't mean no harm, but things ain't been the same since that tahme," he said just after Christmas dinner. Pet often complained to her sister, and especially ths particular year that the ghost of old Polly Ward, "from down yonder in the Green Swamp, sho is haintin' urs this bad yiar. She sho is, Lawd have mercy."

It was the 5th of J nuary of that same arduous winter for the Freemans. The North Carolina coast was caught in a cold weather pattern that slowly curled its way up North and then out to sea. The sun settled low in the sky that day and the Freeman house prepared itself for the coming of Old Christmas-the next day. Pet had done most of her cooking and the girls had finished their baking when Lofton called all to the livingroom table. This was to be Lofton's yearly Christmas message. In order to prepare his children for the truths of the on-rushing holiday-that is its religious nature and its superstitious



tangents--he had prepared to divulge one more story from his long list of strange and peculiar things that have occurred in Columbus County over the years.

"Well chillun, yo Ma knows this one very good, but it ain't that she don't want me to tell it. Thar's a many wonder in this hiar world of ours and Ah ain't no one to doubt nare bit of it nohow. Jesus done come to hep each and every one of urs but He ain't revealed all of the truth to no man yet. Thar sho are some sperts 'round these hiar parts that ain't to rest yet. Someday when that thar great gittin-up mornin' comes this hiar way and we will all walk 'bout in our whaht robes--the good 'monst urs, of course--and we'll take off our shoes an' walk allover God's heben. But to show yall whut Ah means 'bout ghosts and allakina-sperts that ain't at rest yet, let me tell you this-un.

"Thar was an' ol' man who lived down thar in the White Marsh community who said he ain't never believed in haints. Now hiar ol' man and some of his friends would drink some of that thar ol' scuppernon wines sometahmes. It ain't never been good for nare soul, nohow. But they'd git a tinincy bit hagh, too. They then gotta bettin' one 'nother strange things. They finally bet that thar old man that he wouldn't go up to the hangin' rope and bring back a hunk of it fer fahve dollars. But the ol' man went up thar to that thar ol' rope at midnight one tahme. The other men was goina make this hiar ol' man b'lieve in haints. So don't you reckon they drept back some way theirselves to the hangin' rope. That hhar ol' man got thar an' clum up that thar ol' hanging tree raght directly. He done took that thar rope in his hands and started cutting it with his knahfe. The other men was haiden in the bushes. And then one said, "Better git down from thar and let that rope go." Then sudden like out of the woods came this hiar burning bush lahke the one that Moses done talked to. It was a talking and a-blazing, and a-moving, and they all fell to prayin' and askin' for forgiveness.

"Now don't you know that thar ol' man keeled over and dahed, as it happened, Great Balls of Fahre, them thar ol' foolin' men took



to their heels and run to church as fass as possible to pray to the Lawd. Ah knows all this 'cause my three od' devlish cousins, George and Walter Jacobs and Millard Mitchell was 'mongst them who done trahed sech stuff. That thar ol' man's funeral show was somethin' too, they tells me, 'cause Miss Lollie and Aunt Carrie sat thar and ain't said nare word. That show is somethin' fer them, too. They was jess awaitin' fer that there ol' ghost to come into the funeral hall. Ain't figured out yit why they ain't had the funeral at church, but nobody ain't said neither."

The children looked up wide-eyed, frightened, and duly impressed by the solemnity of the occurrence and the ritual it was to introduce for this most important day in the calendar for Lofton and Pet Freeman, namely the 6th of January.

"Now you chillun knows," Lofton continued, "that day breaks two tahmes tonight and you ain't to stir narry a bit, neither. Stay in yo beds an' let the Lawd do His work the way He's goina do no matter whut. Ef you hears the cows a-moooin' and then a bell clangin' and the chickens comin' off the roost with that thar ol; Mr. Rooster out yonder in the chicken house, don't ya'll git up. Do you heah me? It;ll become d rk all over again. The Lawd's jess doin' His work r hght nahce."

The children gave their consent, offered no objection, of course, and prepared themselves for bed and for Old Christmas on the following morning. Pet and Lofton sat up afterwards and talked over other Old Christmases and how their mothers and fathers had told them of the many times they had seen the dawn break twice. Then they would repeat the story all over again about the cows lowing, then kneeling in reverence to the new little Baby and how chickens would come down out of the house and the old rooster would give his morning call earlier than usual.

All Columbus County stretched out in quiet darkness the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth of January. Pet Freeman had checked every room of her home seeing to it that the children were safely in bed and all lights were extinguished. From childhood she



had ever been afraid of carelessly handled candlelight or kerosene lamps. She was particularly suspicious of children in matters of safety. Lofton checked the front door and the back door to see that they were firmly locked--a rare practice in those days in Columbus County.

"Ef gots wants to git in," Lofton would often comment, "Thar ain't nare a lock in this world that kin keep them out, nohow."

Pet's woodstove--passed down from the early years when her grandmother and grandfather had first settled in Columbus County--burned silently. It had been a faithful companion for these many years and for Pet, it was almost a part of the family, something that she talked to from time to time and communicated through to her grandmother regularly. Her sense of ancestry was almost as keenly entwined as her bent for the supernatural and the folkloric occult.

The night air was crisp and the winter nocturnal creatures carried on their centuries-old complaints, jeers, woes, and adorations of one another and for their Maker. The woods about the Freeman house were still although in the distance one could perceive an approaching light. Then there was a stir in the large pine that faced the Freeman home. Lofton, used to the roll of protector and watchman combined, awoke, sat up in bed, and gently called to his wife. They crept to the bedroom window, placed themselves firmly on the floor, clutched at each other in fear and trepidation, silently prayed for protection and help during this, the beginning of the first dawn of Old Christmas. Then they heard something fall down the chimney after some quick steps on the roof. The steps retreated. They waited and the smothered coals began to smoke filling the house with fumes. Then a loud bell began to clang mercilessly near the back door as lights began to flash in all directions. The old cow did awaken and began to moo and complain about the disturbance. The old rooster, thinking it was day, commenced its loud heralding of a new day. He was innocent of the time and the place. The rest of the house came down off the roost and the Freeman home was all aglow with the so-called joy of a happy Christmas morning, for indeed, the wisemen had finally come to worship the newborn King. The children awoke, ran to their mother's and father's room. They crowded



in upon the two adults who sprawled on the floor asking Jesus to help them and to protect them against any evil spirits.

"Lawd habe mercy," cried out Lofton Freeman, "Lahfe has show been hard 'nough this past yiar. Won't you please habe mercy on urs. We knows You's good and that You's got our lahves in You hands, but we needs You protection at this tahme of the birth of You Son, Jesus Christ."

Pet reached out, clutched her baby girl, covered her with kisses and slobbering sounds. She shouted suddenly as she stood up in a fit of fear. "Great Day in the Mornin', Great balls of fahre, Lawd, Ah reckon it's tme tahme to tell you mah sins. They's been many, Lawd. Ah ain't been to church in two weeks. Ah's learn to hate Miss Lollie and Aunt Carrie. Ah knows it's wrong to hate in this world, in You world of love and forgiveness. Lawd, that thar lass chale of mahne ain't belong to Lofton. It's a sin before You, Lawd, and Ah ain't neber told no one till now. Lawd, Ah knows that Ah deserve the fahres of hell. Lawd forgive me this tahme an Lofton and me ain't neber goinna sin no more." She fell back to the floor and as if it were his turn, Lofton took to the window, opened it and screamed out, "Mah Lawd above, do You duty on this most holy night and we will take all that You think we should have. We ain't been good people, we knows that. Ah's sin, too. Ah's been with other folk's wahves and Ah stole some collards from Ol Man Feff Mitchell ten years ago. Lawd, he's daid but Ah'll pay them back to his daughter, Georgina. Lawd, jess have mercy on urs this night. We has seen the double dawn before, but it ain't never been lahke this in our live long days. Lawd we'll be to church up at Rohobeth every Sunday the ress of our lahves."

Then the bell suddenly stopped its frantic ringing and the lights began receding into the dark distances. There were some strange voices fading away with the lights as the entire family lay gasping and panting on the bedroom floor. Slowly, one by one, helped by Pet and Lofton, who had regained some of their composure, they began to disperse, both crying and coughing at the same time.



Lofton had the mind to rush to the fireplace and remove the sack that had fallen down the chimney. He looked it over, thought a bit, dragged it to the back door, tossed it out quickly, thought again, but concluded that it was, too, a part of the Lord's deliverance that night. Pet tended to her children with warm caresses as they finally returned to their beds thinking that indeed Old Christmas was what they had been told it was all these many years by mother and father, uncles and aunts and elders.

Dawn came as usual that morning and Joyce, the oldest daughter whose chore it was to open the gate in the morning so that the two cows could go out to graze, went out of the back door. She stopped at the sight of the old sack that her father had tossed out of doors that very night, bent over it for a moment and started to move on to her morning chores. Then something caught her eye and she bent over and picked up a large glove. She thought for a moment, pressed it under her loosely hanging blouse and moved on to the large gate. She placed the glove under a large oak tree, bent over and looked it over. She buried it there and said nothing again until she was married for fifteen years. By then both Lofton and Pet Freeman had died, and her brothers and sisters were fully grown. It was then, and only then that she told her husband, Phil Boyd Mitchell, the entire story. She told him where she had buried that large glove and that she knew it to be for certain the possession of those two Jacobs brothers, her daddy's first cousins, George and Walter. She knew that something strange had happened that Old Christmas morning and she still believed that the same happened every year, but there was something very peculiar about the fact that the Jacobs boys had left that large glove in her father's back yard near that sack at that time. Some of the world had wondered about the events of that night at the Freeman home, but never the slightest peep of a sound came from the lips of cousins Millard Mitchell, George or Walter Jacobs. In fact, somehow--and no one asked why afterwards--work had taken all three of these young men off to Robeson County. Meanwhile the Freemans made it clear that the Lord had come to their home

directly that holy night at the first Breaking of dawn and they were better people because of it. They went about preaching this gospel and readily convincing many that such things did happen on January 6, Old Christmas.