

The **Kudzu** **Chronicles**

A NOVEL OF HARD TIMES
IN BEARSWAMP



CARROLL GAMBRELL, R.F.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLEN R. DERAMUS

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JOHN E. WISHART
V.P. Georgia Pacific Corp.
(Retired)

The
KUDZU CHRONICLES

A NOVEL OF HARD
TIMES IN BEARSWAMP



by

CARROLL GAMBRELL, RF

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELLEN DeRAMUS

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To
"Pop"
the best of all possible Fathers
and to
Forrest, Old Grumpy;
and
Erin, "Erk the Turk"
who made my Father's Day possible.

And in Remembrance . . .

*I might forget the times she scrubbed my neck,
tucked in my shirttail, or gave me heck.
I might forget much she said to me,
but I will never forget, Mom read to me.*

...and forever present.

*It ain't the tellin' of it; it's the doin' of it that counts.
—Otis-Odis Bohannon*

FOR GUSSIE

who helped most when she was least aware.

All My Love

and for

Robert Christopher



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THE KUDZU CHRONICLES

Dramatis Personae

MONROE PATTERSON . . . *Owner of Kudzu Cove Tree Farm*
MISS BESSIE *Owner of owner of KCTF*
OTIS BOHANNON *Leader of Bohannon Clan*
ODIS BOHANNON *Same person*
ROOSTER BOHANNON *Laconic older brother*
TINY BOHANNON *Youngest Brother, mule strong*
MOLLY BOHANNON *Matriarch of Bohannon clan*
HOMER GREENE *Speechless county agent*
JOHN LITTLEJOHN . . . *County forester with weak stomach*
POLLY CRAKER *Otis' girlfriend and waitress*
HAPPY HANK HEAD *Used car salesman, circus cow*
SETTON ASHBY *Part of cow act w/head*
HI HAT HIATT *Pulpwooder, rival of Otis*
OGDEN HILDEBRANDT . *Banker, holds Bohannon mortgage*
TIDGE HAMM *Mysteriously disappeared individual*
DEPUTY CORPORAL LANCE WAGENER . . . *Motorcycle cop*
SAM HUNDLEY *Sheriff of Keowee County*
RALEIGH GATES *Sam Hundley's star deputy*
DENDY CARTER *Inmate at FCHGA*
CHARLIE TAYLOR *Another inmate*
REV. JAMES EDWARD FUZZEL *Itinerant evangelist,*
Head of PBC Club
DOLLY MAE REILEY *Maid at FCHGA*
MAMIE *Cook at FCHGA mother of Dolly*
PADDY REILEY *Bellicose brother of Dolly*
PAPA REILEY *Dolly's Papa*
BULL CRENSHAW *Fire chief*
OLD SAM *Labrador (Played by himself)*
OLD BET *The Mule*
OLD FRED *Brandt's Bellicose Bull*
GERTRUDE *A Cow w/purple polka dots*
JENNY *Premier Performing Pachyderm*
MYSTERIOUS HERMIT *Who turns out to be A HERO*



TIDGE



MONROE & BESSIE



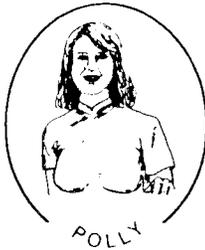
OTIS/ODIS



ROOSTER



TINY



POLLY



MOLLY



BULL CRENSHAW



JOHN



DOLLY



REV. JIM ED FUZZELL



MAMIE



HIGH HAT



SETTON ASHBY



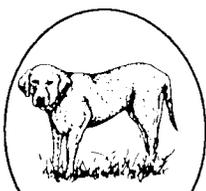
HAPPY HANK



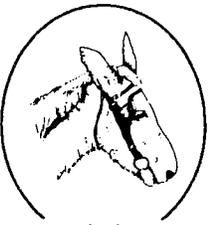
CORP LANCE WAGNER



HOMER GREENE



SAM



BET



DENDY CARTER



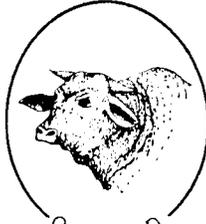
SAM HUNDLEY



C. TAYLOR



O. HILDEBRANDT



OLD FRED



FOREWORD

If it weren't such an obvious work of fiction, one might assert that this is a true story. Indeed certain incidents are based on actual events, and certain places mentioned do exist. On numerous occasions it became necessary to employ a little poetic license, as it were, to bridge the gap between fact and fancy. I will acknowledge it was often difficult to distinguish the difference.

Monroe, the Sage of Bearswamp, is a composite of all good Fathers with a strong resemblance to my own, who is justly proud of having been selected Tree Farmer of the Year **three times**. Not bad for a youngster of 80 odd!

Miss Bessie is all good Wives and Mothers. Based on actual experience, she is the only kind of Wife and Mother I know how to write about.

Anyone who has ever been in or around the woods and timber business in the South will recognize Otis-Odis and the Bohannon Clan. They have been around forever. Without them, there wouldn't be a woods business. No one on Earth works harder for their bread than those who wrest a living from the forest; and no one can laugh harder at themselves than those who earn an honest day's pay for an honest day's labor. We hope this account offends none of these folks. Honest, it was all in fun!

To forestall lawsuits for libel and defamation, I wish to declare that, other than those known to history, names of characters, even fictional ones, have been changed to protect the guilty. I would have changed the name of kudzu, too, if it would have done any good; but to paraphrase the Bard, "Kudzu, by any other name, would be as bad . . ."

CARROLL GAMBRELL

You won't find Bearswamp on a map, but it is in the Foothills not too far from Stumphouse Mountain; sort of between Coneross and Bountyland. Once a land of red hills and cotton; now a land of rolling hills and green forests. This story takes place during that transition period.

Bearswamp is in a region that has produced some of the prettiest girls, skinniest mules, and longest staple cotton ever known to man. It also produced a locally well known Sage whose parting advice seeing his son off to college, was, "Son, stay away from po' folks and ugly women."

I have never seen an ugly woman, but the po' folks do keep cropping up.

Carroll Gambrell
Tuscaloosa, Ala.
July, 1991



PROLOGUE

It was a bright and sunny day three years before the events related in the following chapters took place. The Bohannon boys in the wagon behind Old Bet, were headed home from the cotton gin. Otis, who, for reasons of his own also answered to "Odis," had the money in his shirt pocket from the cotton they had just sold. It was a pretty poor payday for all the effort it took. He was thinking it would be nice to get in some other line of work with more regular paydays than farming, when Old Bet shied.

"Whoa!" Otis called, hauling back on the reins. The same thing that startled Old Bet had caught his eye, too. It was sunlight reflecting from the dented road-pocked chrome grill of a yellow truck parked in the front of a row of vehicles lined up for public inspection on a car lot. HAPPY HANK'S USED CARS, the sign proclaimed. "Why Walk When Hank Will Give You A Ride! We Make Deals For Wheels. We Trade For **ANYTHING**", was written in smaller letters underneath.

Tiny and Rooster dismounted and followed Otis up to the little wooden office in the center of the yard, where they were greeted by no less a personage than the Great Rider Provider himself; a grinning, gregarious Happy Hank, hand outstretched; a gesture made from habit, with the palm up.

"Yessir! Come on in. Can I he'p you? Heah, that's right. Have a seat. Hank Head's the name. My card, gents," the dapper over-sized round man in a striped suit, straw boater, bow tie and two-toned wing-tipped perforated pointed-toed shoes whipped out a card and pointed it toward Odis. A stub of a cigar was forked between two rhinestoned fingers, and a gleaming gold tooth accented the broad grin that

seemed frozen on his florid face. "Got tradin' on yer mind, you landed in the right place, Brothers!"

Putting on his most important banker-type look, Otis said, "We ain't comin' t' trade. We're here to invest."

Tiny and Rooster looked at each other and shrugged. It wasn't the first time Odis had neglected to inform them of his plans; mostly because he just sort of made them up as he went along.

Hank's grin got a little broader and involved the eyebrows. "What're you figgurin' on investin' in, gents," he said, edging closer and eyeing the bulge with just the tip of a money green bill sticking out of Otis's shirt pocket. Opportunity was a thing Hank never avoided as a matter of principal. Visions of a week at the Beach began to play in his mind.

"We 'uz thinkin' mostly about the pupwood business," he replied, as Tiny and Rooster eyed him with astonishment.

"I didn't know we-" Tiny started to say before Otis cut him off.

"Me and my brothers here, have been menistratin' over it for quite a while, an' we're about ready to make a decision, if we can find something that meets our specs."

"Odis, are you cr-" Rooster said.

Otis cut in, "Yep, we been constipatin' on that yellow truck out there."

"It's been constipatin' me, too," Hank muttered under his breath.

"How's that?" Odis said.

"Oh! I said let's go see," Hank said, as he stood and they all filed out to inspect the yellow truck.

"That's as fine a piece of equipment as I have ever seen for the money! A regular workhorse. Excellent condition. You certainly do have an eye for sound investment. It just happens I can make you a real deal on that one. That truck is a cream puff and a steal at just eight hundred dollars . . . cash,"

Happy Hank beamed, calculating the size of the bulge in Odis' pocket ought to be worth a little time at the shore.

"Looks kind of used up to me," Rooster put in dryly.

"It's a previously owned vehicle, sir." Hank fielded Rooster's objection smoothly. "It was used in important War work at one time, and that slightly off color door was part of the camouflage. A token of its reliability, you might say," Hank noted, tasting the salt air.

True, the passenger door was a sort of off-orangish as the result of a home made paint job begun and abandoned by its third owner some years prior; a fact Hank had just given a rather imaginative new twist. A faded "WOCO PEP" sign and the barely visible outline of a fuzzy animal of some sort, probably a bear or a coon, gave a clue that its original purpose was to transport petroleum products. Whether to the neighborhood filling station, or to the front lines, as Hank had intimated, you couldn't really say. However, the beat up cab favored Hank's version.

"As you can see, gents, it is indeed a pre-war model," Happy H chirped on, visions of surf, suds and scanty swim suits dancing in his head.

"Which war?" Rooster muttered.

"They don't make 'em like this anymore," Hank said, ignoring Rooster. Tiny retrieved the hubcap, the only one the truck possessed, that fell off when Hank demonstrated the soundness of the truck's construction with a whack of his cane.

"I'll take that, son," Hank said, tossing the fickle disc into the cab and out of sight. He wisely refrained from whacking any tires. They were obviously too thin to stand the test.

"How much?" Otis asked.

"I hadn't really planned to sell it to just anybody, but since you all have proven yourselves to be gentlemen of unusual perspicacity, I am willing to part with it." Hank was not ashamed to use the old trite formulas to reach sea, sun and sand.

"How much?" Odis repeated.

"You won't believe your ears when I tell you the deal I can make you on this reliably proven transport," the glint in Hank's eye grew brighter, as he thought of sipping a tall cool one at Sammy's Mudflat Lounge and Oyster Bar.

"Try me," Odis suggested.

You know, outside of its important War Work, she's only been driv by a old lady takin' peaches to the curb market, and you'll be stealin' it at seven fifty," Hank smacked the table and smiled ingratiatingly, gold tooth reflecting sunlight.

"She does look a mite road worn," Odis commented.

Hank's face took on a different look as he took a slightly alternate tack. "I can see you've got an eye for detail. Tell you what I'll do. I'll level with you boys. I didn't want to bring this up, an' I'd appreciate it if you promised not to pass it around. I'll be makin' a sacrifice that will likely drive me out of business, but my child's got to have an operation, and I'm desperate for money." Hank screwed his face into a benign and prayerful attitude at the mention of pediatric surgery, and although Hank was childless, the last part was true. He **was** getting desperate.

"How much is this operation goin' t' cost?" Odis asked.

"Five hundred bucks, and she's yours." Hank replied, still eyeing Odis's bulging pocket and dreaming of at least a weekend at the lake.

"How about forty dollars and the mule," Odis countered.

"Make it a hundred," Hank said, "and I'll air the tires free." The sound of surf rapidly faded.

"I'll go thirty, and throw in the wagon," Odis said.

"How 'bout the harness? Mule and wagon ain't no good without the harness," Hank countered. He could still have a day at the County Lake.

Twenty dollars, mule, wagon and harness." Odis said, getting to his feet.

"That's yo' **final** offer," Hank looked wounded and

incredulous, plans for Myrtle Beach long gone, and a day at the lake going up in smoke.

"That's it," Odis said, heading for the door.

Hank was a realist. Sometimes you have to take what you can get, but he did hate to see that bulging pocket walk out of there. However, it would cost him ten to get the canary colored wreck hauled off his lot and back to the junk yard where he got it.

Pondering but a moment, Hank moved quickly to bar Otis's path. "I'll take it before I have to pay you to take it off my hands!" Hank said, visions of beach and lake melding into that of a ham sandwich at the White Star.

Otis reached into his shirt pocket, peeled the twenty dollar bill from around a plug of chewing tobacco, bit off a chew and handed the twenty and the plug to an astonished Hank. "Have a chew."

"Wha-! N-N-No thanks," Hank coughed as he sank heavily into the overstuffed plastic love seat that constituted the guest lounge of his office, "I just et a cigar."

"Write us up a bill of sale and we'll go get the tag while you air up the tires."

Old Woco sounded a lot like a threshing machine when they drove it off the lot past a placid Old Bet, who was about to doze off, and a sweating not-too-Happy Hank, who was mopping his brow with a large red bandanna.

Tiny and Rooster had to push Old Woco the last mile home while Odis steered. Happy Hank had aired the tires, all right, but he had siphoned off most of the gas while the boys were at the Court House buying the tag.

During the night Old Bet chewed her halter and, still in harness with the wagon behind her, was standing outside the barn door waiting for her oat bag the next morning when Tiny went out to milk. She had been down that road before.



KUDZU COVE

"What do you make of it?" asked the head floating on the chlorophyll sea. The head belonged to Monroe Patterson, recent retiree who had just moved back to the farm he had left as a young man forty years before. The rest of his body was hidden under five and a half feet of bedded kudzu vines that had begun to take over the farm, which had lain idle since his sister's death a few years before.

The question was addressed to another floating head; bald, red, sweating and bespectacled, belonging to Homer Greene, County Agent.

"I'm just speechless. I don't know what to say," Homer replied. It is just a mess. No doubt about that. Otherwise I just don't know what to say. I-I'm just speechless that's all. I've never seen anything quite like it, an' I've seen a lot of kudzu patches in my time. I've seen bigger ones, but I don't think I have ever seen thicker ones, and I've **never** seen one with tunnels running through it like Swiss cheese. It's weird. It's is just-just . . . I'm just flabbergasted."

Monroe waited until the speech wound down before asking, "I don't care about the holes. That's just a curiosity, but what can I do with the kudzu? How do you get rid of the stuff? It's going to eat me alive!"

"Best thing I know to do, Mr. Patterson, is to fence it and put cows on it," Homer looked around, "or goats. I'm not sure a herd of elephants wouldn't get lost in this patch. I've just never seen the beat. I just don't know what to say. It's just monumental. I've never seen anything like it! It takes your breath away. And the thing is full of tunnels. I can tell you right off I've never seen anything like that. I'm just completely

stunned over that one. The only thing I can say is that deer must be bedding in here, but if it's deer, there must be a jillion of 'em. I guess it could be bears. This **is** Bearswamp, isn't it? 'Course nobody has seen a bear in here for sixty years, but you never know." He looked around nervously, as if he expected to see a big grizzly rear up and grab him. "Otherwise, I'm just completely—"

"Speechless?" Monroe finished for him.

"Floored," Homer finished to his own satisfaction.

Monroe was beginning to wonder what Homer would be like wound up, if he were speechless now.

"It's like a rabbit warren in there," Homer said, "but I'd hate to see a rabbit that could make a tunnel that big."

"I know," Monroe answered. "I've never—" he broke off, not wanting to get Homer started again.

While Homer was being speechless about how to get rid of the stuff, Monroe had considered and dismissed the fleeting thought of a 50 Megaton Bomb as being a little too drastic, although the idea might have merit as a last resort. As events unfolded, the thought recurred more often. Lack of resources may have been the only thing that prevented Bearswamp from becoming a Test Area.

Monroe didn't want to ask Homer anymore leading questions right then. It was sticky and uncomfortable in the kudzu thicket, so he suggested they get out of there and discuss it in a cooler spot.

The heads disappeared, and the green surface rippled in the manner of a torpedo wake, as they made their way back through the vines via the leafy tunnel Monroe had discovered. As they made their way out, Monroe pondered that Moses may have parted the Red Sea with a wave of his rod, but it took something with a cutting edge to tunnel through the closely layered ropes of kudzu. But who had time, energy, or the inclination to make tunnels through a kudzu thicket? That didn't make sense. This wasn't mining country, so it couldn't

be an ambitious coal miner practicing on his day off. Homer was right, it must be deer. Monroe dismissed the thought of the tunnels in favor of finding a method to eradicate the pesky vine entirely.

It was a hot June morning with a slight breeze stirring in the shade of the well house; bees working along the fence in flowers that had not yet shed their morning dew. The heat in the kudzu thicket, even early on one of the rare days of the year, had been stifling.

"The thing about kudzu is that it doesn't just reach out and choke, it reaches out and covers everything up," Homer was off and running again. "It's more like green lava coming up out of a bottomless pit out there. I've just never seen anything quite like it. Downright sinister, that's what it is. Sort of gives me the willies the way it works. I-I'm just-

"It's bad business, all right, and I've got to find some way to control it, or it's going to cover the place up," Monroe said, as Homer's engine sputtered to a temporary halt.

They sat mopping brows, sharing a dipper of cold water from the limestone bottomed well, and considering the misguided collective bureaucratic wisdom that had inflicted this green plague upon the land in the first place.

"Those people ought to have been thinking ahead more before they got farmers to plant that stuff," Homer said. "They might of known cows weren't going to be around here forever. Land's gotta be saved, all right, but, doggies, that stuff entombs it! They should've found some way to control it before they turned it loose. It's just plumb outrageous the way the Government don't think things out sometimes. Just leave it to the politicians, they'll think of some way to tax you, plague you, and get elected at the same time! Sometimes I get so mad thinkin' about it, I don't know what to say!"

"I know. It just leaves you speechless, doesn't it?" Monroe was catching on.

To keep Homer from further periods of speechlessness on the subject of kudzu, Monroe asked him about managing the young timber that seemed to have stopped growing.

"You might ought to think about getting a pu'pwooder in here to thin out some of those trees. You know they're plenty big enough for paper wood, now, and they're 'bout to get too crowded to grow. Bugs like trees that aren't growin'. Next thing you know you're going to have pine beetles in here, and they're worse'n boll weevils," Homer said.

"Are they worse than kudzu?" Monroe asked.

"I'm not sure **anything** is worse than kudzu," Homer replied, "but pine beetles will sure kill your trees in a hurry, if they get started."

"Homer," Monroe said, "I don't want to be like that old hen that laid more eggs than she could set. I've always believed you can't hurt but in one place at a time, and right now the kudzu is causing more pain than anything else."

Leaning back on the well box, Monroe thought about it, while surveying the scene before them, shimmering in the early summer morning heat.

The lush green lake spread over about ten or twelve acres of what used to be mostly pasture and the area of an old field where Cootie gave the topsoil to the County.

She had wanted to improve the road that ran in front of the house and wound on in to Luthersville three miles away. Cootie was Monroe's sister, who had stayed on the farm to look after things and care for their aging Mother. Cootie and Monroe had been close, and when she died she left him her half interest in the farm. It was Cootie who had gotten the CCC to plant the trees; and it was Cootie who had gotten the SCS to plant kudzu on the scar left from scraping up the topsoil. Kudzu must thrive on hard clay. Not a sprig had died.

Now it was a silent menace in a green mantle, creeping over the earth, threatening Monroe's farm and his pine trees. Sinuous leafy tentacles at the edge of the growth greedily

pioneered new territory. Homer said it was downright sinister, and he was right. It did leave you kind of speechless, but it also gave Monroe plenty to do.

Monroe had his priorities straight. He knew what he had to do first, but, in talking about thinning the pine trees, Homer had planted a seed for thought. After all pines were the crop now. Cotton was no longer King; not in Western Carolina.

Monroe would get to the pine timber problem, but the kudzu had to be brought under control first. At the time he reached that decision, he might not have fully appreciated the size of the problem he faced; but he knew he had to get at it quickly, or it might be too late. Monroe was ready to go to work before Homer became speechless again.

As they rose and shook hands in parting, neither of them could have possibly detected the stooped figure that was disappearing silently down the tunnel in the kudzu that branched off the one they had used for access.



THE TROOPS

In Monroe's behalf, it might be said that, at least it didn't appear that he underestimated the job at hand. Short of the 50 Megaton Bomb previously mentioned, he came out with just about every available weapon for fighting kudzu.

He knew it was not going to be like fighting weeds in a garden, because in this case he was concerned with only one species, that's all; a single species, identifiable, hardy, persistent, pervasive, and destructive. The plant was an alien, and had no known enemies over here, except the ones it created itself. Certainly, as far as Monroe was concerned, it should never have been introduced to these shores in the first place.

To Monroe, gauging the size and depth of the thicket he faced, the kudzu might have been placed here to plague him alone. To say he looked upon it entirely as a personal battle might be overstating the case slightly. Nevertheless, it was a battle Monroe was determined to win.

* * * * *

"C'mon back! C'mon back! Just a little more!"

"Ssssssssst! Sssssssst" Too late, Monroe realized he had been directed too close to where the kudzu had covered and finally flattened the old barn. Not only had he picked up two flat tires, he had wrapped about a hundred feet of vines around the drive shaft. Switching off the engine, he started to climb out of the pickup.

"Whoa! Mr. Patterson! Hold it! Just leave it where it is and we'll unload right there."

Since there was little chance of moving, Monroe left it right there.

The voice with the belated instructions and unfailing grasp of the obvious came from one of the Bohannon brothers Monroe had engaged to help with the fencing. Otis, his name was; or Odis. No one knew for sure; not even his mother. It seems he was born twins, but one of them died in the cradle, and no one knew which one; so the survivor answered for both. Otis and Odis.

Answering for two people must have given him an edge, for it was to him the rest of the clan looked for leadership. Although neither the class nor the teacher regarded Odis as an intellectual giant during the few weeks of the year he had attended the one room school over on Blue Ridge, he did learn to read a little, and he could count at an early age. Among his own, he was considered no less than a mental marvel. Other evidence to the contrary, Otis shared the tribal view.

Odis, it was, who had directed Monroe too close to the kudzu patch; and Otis it was who would direct his brothers, Tiny and Rooster, in unloading the truck, changing and patching the tires, unwinding the tangle from the drive shaft, and any other jobs that required the services of a director.

It wasn't that Odis was lazy; far from it! In many views he was highly over active; often to the sorrow of by-standers and other innocents. He also regarded himself as a solver of problems, and that could be dangerous, indeed, as many whose problems he had solved could attest.

In fact, although definite proof was lacking, it had been suspected that, if you didn't have a problem he might create one for you, just so he could solve it. However, as to directing, that fell within the provenance of leadership. He was the leader, and he had directed Monroe into the kudzu.

"Tiny, get up there and toss that stuff down. Me an' Rooster will stack it," Otis directed.

Tiny obediently climbed aboard, and the truck sank another six inches into the bedded mass; nor did it rise perceptibly after he began tossing rolls of barbed wire, fence posts, staples, crowbars, hammers and fencing tools to his cohorts on the ground.

Apparently the Bohannon clan were not only unable to accurately identify its surviving members, it had a genius for misnaming its other sons.

Tiny, the youngest of the lot, weighed in at something over 300 pounds, and was at least seventeen inches too short for the weight he carried. For breakfast he was accustomed to stoking up on a dozen eggs, a pound of bacon, a chum of buttermilk and a gallon of gravy with a commensurate number of biscuits. Sometimes he would add a pot of grits and half a ham with red-eye just to keep up his strength.

His wide grin had only a couple of teeth missing in front. A cherubic face, usually covered with a week old beard, matched a cheerful, almost child-like disposition. That, along with a rotund body belied his simian strength. He could straighten a crowbar without straining. Although he was surprisingly agile, slam dunking basket balls would not be in his line.

A cap of the sort handed out by chain saw salesmen and logging equipment dealers, bill turned backwards, fought for mastery over a wild mass of hair that had never known more than horse shears, and that seldom. It was Monroe's guess that it also served as a nightcap, for he had never seen it off Tiny's head.

He wore an orange Clemson jersey with a blue 19 on the back and a fearsome looking tiger pouncing from the huge mound of his abdomen. The bottom of the jersey lacked a good six inches of making the acquaintance of the much patched blue jeans, top two buttons of the fly missing, which were held in precarious position by an old plow line around his ample girth; hairy belly-button exposed to the weather.

Neither blue jeans, jersey, nor the occupant of that sartorial splendor evinced any knowledge of soap and water.

Tiny had once been out plowing when a bald headed gentleman in a blue roadster with tobacco stains all over the door stopped to ask directions. When Tiny pointed with the plow, the bald headed gentleman swallowed his tobacco and gasped, "My God!" Reaching into the back seat, he produced an object and asked, "Son, do you think you could pass this?" Tiny eyed the object for a moment. He had never seen a football. "Well," he said, "I could swaller it all right, but I doubt I could pass it."

The bald headed gentleman, with head still spinning, drove on in the direction Tiny had pointed; tobacco juice decorating window and door; muttering to himself curses against academic rules requiring proof of at least minimal literacy even to enter the Agricultural College where he coached football, and dreamed one day of becoming National Champ. So close, sometimes, do we come to fame and fortune!

Rooster, the other brother and eldest of the clan, was as spare as Tiny was beefy; and laconic as Tiny was ebullient. Rooster never moved fast, and, from long experience, always expected the worst; which might not have happened on some occasions had he moved faster. Rooster didn't invite trouble, and Lord knows, he didn't want any. Misfortune just seemed to puddle up where he was standing. He drew it as a tall pine draws lightning. Although he was more often victimized by one of Odis' brainstorm, he was perfectly capable of striking out on his own.

Sighting a tornado one day, he did exactly as the Weatherman instructed. He abandoned his truck and "sought shelter in a ditch", which happened to be the drainage ditch from a dairy barn. The tornado failed to touch down and didn't come within a half mile of Rooster, cowering in the ditch. But he was nearly drowned in the wall of rainwater and

cow manure that stripped the clothes from his body and swept him almost to Colonel's Fork before he could grab a low limb and hold on until the flood subsided.

He spent the rest of the day hiding in the swamp, swatting at flies attracted by the cow manure clinging to his hair, and slapping clouds of mosquitoes feasting on blood through his bare skin. After dark, swollen, itching, reeking, starved out and naked, he slipped home unseen.

In the meantime, the sheriff, finding Rooster's truck in the road and no one about, had sent a wrecker to tow it in. It took Rooster three days to find out what had happened to his truck. Then, before they would let him have it back, he had to pay the tow bill and a fine for blocking a public road. With receipt in hand, he went to the County Compound to claim his goods only to discover someone had stolen the battery, spare tire, and left front wheel. He finally gave up and walked back to Bearswamp, abandoning the more or less stripped vehicle to gather rust where it sat.

"All right, Tiny, lift up on the truck while Rooster changes the tire," Otis directed. "Then we'll patch it and put it back on."

Tiny backed up to the tailgate, grabbed the bumper, and, with one heave, seemed to grow six inches shorter and a foot wider. The rear wheels came at least a foot off the ground and clear of the vines.

Rooster, not fast but efficient, had two lug nuts off and was working on a third when Tiny let out a "YEEEEOWW!" and dropped the truck, pinning Rooster's foot to the ground beneath the flattened tire.

That's another thing about kudzu. Yellow-jackets often build nests under its protective cover. The nest in question lay near the rear of the truck, just where Tiny's feet straddled the exit where the guards sit on the lookout for danger.

The jostling of the unloading operation had alerted them, but failed to trigger an attack. However, the threat of a

13 triple E on their doorstep produced a Red Alert and a Scramble.

The first valiant airman to sacrifice himself plunged through an unpatched hole in Tiny's jeans located near the South Pole, while three others struck the region of the Tropic of Capricorn, chronically bare due to the failure of jersey to meet jeans, as aforementioned.

So much for the threat on the doorstep; now for the idiot that seemed to want to stay and fight it out! At least a dozen struck home before Monroe, thinking fast, seized the fire extinguisher out of the truck cab and aimed a heavy fog at the swarm around Rooster's head.

It didn't have much affect on the four or five Kamikazes that went down the back of Rooster's shirt, but the rest scattered enough so that, with Monroe standing guard with the fire extinguisher, Odis could get the jack under the running board and free Rooster's bruised and slightly splayed foot.

Dragging him to the safety and shade of the well house, Monroe and Otis applied chewing tobacco poultices to Rooster's swollen head, which, covered with the fine white powder from the fire extinguisher, bore a close resemblance to a sad faced clown. It was not until they heard a hollow sounding shout from an indeterminable direction that it dawned on them that Tiny was missing.

"Hey!" came the ghostly voice again. "Get me out of here. It's freezing and I'm 'bout'n t'drown!"

"It's Tiny! He's in the well!:" Odis exclaimed.

Odis and Monroe peered into the cavernous depths, and sure enough, there was Tiny in the bottom of the well; head and shoulders above the water, clamoring for someone to drop the bucket down and get him out before he froze or drowned.

Rooster, in the meantime, had struggled to his feet, limped over to the pile of fencing tools and selected a sledgehammer as suiting his purposes best. Then, staggering

over to the well box and peering into the gloom, dropped the heavy tool into the hole.

"Clang! Thud! OOOWWW!"

"Hang on to that and we'll pull you out after lunch!"
Rooster called down.

Monroe had his troops, but somehow victory seemed less than assured.



LIVESTOCK

"Are you sure livestock is the best thing to control this kudzu with, Homer?" Monroe asked.

"That was the original intention, Mr. Pat," Homer said. "The idea was to plant the kudzu to hold the soil, and the cattle would graze it and keep it under control. I just don't know what made them think there would always be cattle around to graze it."

"Well, as the man said when his friends asked him why he had just jumped out of a fifth story window, 'It seemed like a good idea at the time'," Monroe said, "And I suppose at the time it was."

Monroe and Homer were watching the dozen head of cattle graze around the kudzu. Some of them had disappeared into the tangle, and had no doubt discovered some of the mysterious tunnels that honeycombed the thicket.

"Looks like an awful lot of kudzu for a few cattle to eat up," Monroe said.

"Well, they are making a start on it, anyway," Homer said. "What about the goats?"

"I put the goats in that patch around the little green house," Monroe said.

"I didn't know there was a little green house," Homer said.

"It's the little house my grandfather built for tenants a long time ago," Monroe said. "It's been covered up in kudzu so long, I doubt if you would remember it, but the goats have about cleaned up around it now. Come on, I'll show you."

Monroe led Homer down the path through the woods to the old house.

"It's surprising how much a few goats can do," Homer said upon seeing how the goats had cleaned up around the old house. "I'd never have known it was there.

"Did you and the Bohannon boys get the whole place fenced?" Homer asked.

"Yes, we got a lot of wire pulled, after we got at it. When Tiny stretches it, you can play a tune on it," Monroe said. "The problem was getting them over here long enough to get the job done. They are mostly pulpwooders, you know. I could only get them the last part of the week, when the yard wasn't taking any more wood."

"I think they are cutting that buggy timber of Mrs. Kyle's," Homer said.

"What do you mean, 'buggy timber'?" Monroe asked.

"It's got bugs in it," Homer said, "Southern pine beetles."

"Oh, I thought you meant somebody was making buggies out of it," Monroe said.

"Can't make anything out of it but paper, after the bugs kill it," Homer said. "When the bug bores into the tree, he carries the blue-stain fungus in with him, accordin' to John Littlejohn, our County Forester. Before the tree dies, it's already blue-stained and down-graded, as far as lumber is concerned."

"Can anything be done to keep the bugs out?" Monroe asked.

"Accordin' to Littlejohn, the best thing you can do is to keep the forest healthy."

"You mean fertilize it?"

"I reckon you could do that, but it would be mighty expensive. John says the best thing is to thin 'em out when they get crowded up, an' give 'em room to grow. It's like we used to do when we thinned cotton. At least the principle is the same," Homer said.

"I guess it's a lot like gettin' the weeds out of your garden," Monroe said.

"Except you get paid for your weeds," Homer added.

Monroe's ears perked up. "I never thought of it that way," he said, "How much will I get paid?"

" 'Cordin' to John, pulpwood stumpage is about \$4 a cord, but it really depends on what kind of bargain you make with whoever cuts it."

"What's stumpage?" Monroe asked.

"That's what they call the part you get," Homer explained.

"I like that part," Monroe said, "but how do they know which trees to cut?"

"John marks 'em with paint," Homer said. "He puts one mark about eye high, and another one down at the ground, so after the tree's cut and gone, you can tell whether or not it was marked."

"What did you mean by 'getting paid for weeds'?" Monroe asked. "They are all pines, aren't they?"

"Well, sure, but the trees John marks are the over-topped, crooked, forked and diseased ones. I guess you could call them kinda 'weedy'," Homer said. "Why don't you go see Littlejohn and talk to him about it?"

"I think I will," Monroe said, "but I've got some other things to take care of first. This kudzu isn't getting gone nearly fast enough."

* * * * *

"You sure this stuff will kill kudzu?" Monroe asked the man at the seed and feed store. They were looking at a drum of dry pellets the size of field peas.

"That's what it says right here on the label," he answered. "Look at this list of what it kills," he said, pointing at the label.

"Looks like it will kill about anything that grows," Monroe said. "How do you put it out?"

"It does. You put it out with a hand seeder. Just spread it over the stuff you want to kill. It goes into the plant through its root system; then what's left on the ground just breaks up and leaches out before the next growin' season."

Monroe was very leery of chemical warfare. He knew it had a way of backfiring, and he didn't want to run that risk, if he could help it.

"This is powerful stuff," he said dubiously. "I've got cattle and goats grazing in there. Will it hurt them?"

"Not accordin' to what it says here," the man said, quoting the label, "Safe around livestock and grazing animals."

"I'll give it a try," Monroe said.

* * * * *

Monroe would gladly have paid one of the Bohannon boys to spread the herbicide for him, but they weren't available. Saturday afternoons were strictly reserved for recreation, which they might spend in Shorty's Pool Room, following which Otis headed for the White Star, where he cadged free hot dogs from his girl friend, Polly, a waitress there. Polly paid for the hot dogs from her tips, but Odis didn't know it.

Polly Wanda Craker, named for her father, Paul, and her mother, Wanda, was a pretty, hard working sensible girl. She had learned early on to deal with things directly, by developing a wicked left hook that put a stop to taunts of "Polly Wanta Cracker" at recess. Given her usual bent to practicality, it was a mystery to friends and family alike why she should have wasted three years waiting for Otis to pop the question. The answer was put down to patient determination, which Polly also possessed in abundance.

While Odis was at the White Star, Tiny could be found at the Strand Theater, munching popcorn while Johnny Mack Brown shot rustlers, and the Three Stooges cavorted across the

silver screen. Rooster was content to spend the rest of the afternoon on the whittlers' bench in front of the Court House, trading gossip and pocket knives with other leading citizens.

Whatever the boys did Saturday night, Molly Bohannon, matriarch of the tribe, didn't put up with any foolishness on Sunday mornings. The whole clan would file in and occupy the rear pew of the little Church at Black Gum Springs. Elder Whitson, aging pastor of the little church, and a fervent advocate of the hellfire and brimstone school, applied both generously. Satan might triumph on Saturday night, but Sundays belonged to the Lord. Elder Whitson never allowed dim vision and poor hearing to dampen his spirits, nor soften his sermons. He was pleased to note that his exhortations to Repent never failed to cow the rambunctious Bohannon Brothers into an eyes-closed prayerful silence. The snores escaping from that area, he took as moans of remorse for sins he was confident they had committed.

By Monday morning eye-balls were properly lining up with the holes in their heads, and the boys were once again ready to greet the world.

In the meantime, Monroe did the best he could to apply the herbicide pellets as directed, but found it impossible to penetrate much beyond the outside perimeter of the thicket. He had been very careful to spread the pellets only on the kudzu, having no desire to kill something he didn't mean to kill.

About a week later, however, he was alarmed to observe signs of an early fall. Leaves on the apple trees were beginning to turn, and the old walnut was well advanced . . . In June? Some pines were dying, too. What had happened? He had been especially careful to keep the pellets on the kudzu and away from anything else. Monroe called Homer, who proved to be of little comfort.

"Looks to me exactly like those trees have been poisoned. You sure you didn't scatter some of them pellets a little too far?" Homer asked.

"Positive," Monroe replied, "I didn't get within a hundred feet of those dead trees."

"You didn't let those goats eat any of that stuff, did you?"

"I didn't feed it to them, if that's what you mean," Monroe said, "but the salesman said it wouldn't hurt them, if they did eat some of it off the ground. That was one of the good things about it."

"What! You mean that idiot salesman didn't tell you what would happen if they ate it? This is preposterous! It's outrageous! I don't know what to say! How could he sell you that stuff and not tell you what would happen if the animals ate it? I'm outraged! I'm speechless! It beats anything I have ever been around. How some people can be so dog blasted inconsiderate. I'm going to go give him a piece of my mind. What did he mean for you to do? Did he think you wanted to turn the place into a desert? Did he think you wanted -"

"All he said was it wouldn't hurt the animals," Monroe cut in.

"I can't believe he let you go out of there not knowin'," Homer said.

"Not knowing what?" Monroe asked, getting a little exasperated.

"What happens when goats eat those pellets," Homer said.

"What does happen when goats eat those pellets?" Monroe asked, beginning to believe he would never know.

"Let me explain it to you," Homer said. "What happens is that when they eat it nothing happens to them."

"I **know** that Homer," Monroe answered, "That's just what the salesman told me."

"Well, he's right, as far as the goats are concerned. It don't hurt **them**," Homer said.

"Okay. The goats are fine. What happened to my apple trees?" Monroe was trying not to shout. "What does goats

eating pellets have to do with my apple trees dying?"

"It turns goats into walking spray cans, that's what!" Homer said. "The reason that stuff don't hurt 'em is that it don't stay in 'em. It just goes right through. I can't believe he didn't -"

"All he told me was it was guaranteed safe around livestock, and that's what it says on the label."

"Well," Homer said, "The livestock **is** safe, but whatever they piss on ain't. Reason it don't hurt 'em is it just runs on through, **includin'** that part that kills trees."

"You mean to tell me that my apple trees have been killed by goat piss!" Monroe exclaimed.

"That's about it," Homer replied. "Them goats is lethal to apple trees and any other kind. You can't let 'em get around nothing that grows until that acid gets out of their system, unless you want to see it keel over and die. It just leaves me speechless. I don't know what else to say about it."

Monroe didn't, either.

* * * * *

That evening, taking a last look around before dark, Monroe was almost certain he heard a strange noise from the direction of the kudzu patch. It could have been frogs. It might have been a migratory night bird passing through. It might have been a viney death rattle . . . or a herbaceous horse laugh.

Next day, Monroe noticed the last drum of pellets was missing.



MONROE STRIKES A BARGAIN

In spite of the wilted look in the kudzu, Monroe didn't kid himself that the battle was won. He had struck a mean blow with the herbicide pellets, even at a cost to himself, but all he had really done was shrink the size of the kudzu patch around the edges. So far, so good, but he didn't consider the job more than barely started. However, there wasn't much more he could do right then, except wait until he could burn it.

All the stock, including the goats, were penned into one lot away from anything they might kill, until all the herbicide was out of their system. Of course, that meant Monroe had to buy hay and feed them, but that was the best he could do. In the meantime, the kudzu missed by the pellet and urine attack was growing its merry way.

This thing was getting expensive, and since there was a temporary cease fire in Great Kudzu Campaign, Monroe could turn his thoughts to other things, such as getting some pulpwood out of the CCC pines. What Homer had said about thinning the stand made sense, and it would bring in a little cash, too. The unexpected expenses were mounting up.

Monroe and Miss Bessie climbed into the Johnny Reb pickup to go into Luthersville. It was about three miles into town, and on the way they met a beat up yellow truck under what appeared to be a mountain of wood. There was an arm sticking out of it frantically waving them down.

"Is that Odis?" Miss Bessie asked.

"Looks like 'im," Monroe said. "Wonder what he wants?"

They pulled to the side and waited as the wooden Everest approached and ground to a stop, a wisp of steam rising from under the hood.

"Hey, Mr. Pat!" Otis greeted Monroe. "Y'all going to town?"

"We were thinking about it," Monroe replied, gazing at the load that seemed ready to topple over.

"I'm headed to George Fenney's yard with this load. Saw you comin' and thought we might chat a little."

"What is it you're wanting to chat about in the middle of the road, Odis?" Monroe asked.

"I been thinkin' about that timber you got," Otis replied. "It looks like it might need a little work. You gonna get worms in it, if you ain't careful."

"That's what I've been told," Monroe said.

"That's hi come we're cuttin' Mizz Kyle's timber now. It got worms and started dyin'. See, it's done started turnin' blue," Odis pointed.

"I can see. Is that what did that?" Monroe asked.

"Yep. Gets blue stained every time, and the sawmills don't want it then. Has to go for pulpwood, and you don't get as much for it. Them worms makes the trees look like some of your goats might have been in 'em," Otis grinned.

"Don't get any ideas, Odis," Monroe shuddered a little at the thought.

"Hi 'bout I come over to yo' place and we talk about that timber sometime," Otis suggested.

"I got a few arrangements to make first, Otis, but I'll call you when I'm ready," Monroe said.

Odis agreed and they parted. The yellow truck lurched on toward Fenney's Woodyard in a cloud of smoke, and Monroe and Miss Bessie went on into town to see Homer and "make some arrangements". Homer took them to the County Forester's Office and introduced them to John Littlejohn.

* * * * *

John Littlejohn, the County Forester, forked the last of

the green beans into his mouth and eyed what was left of a once thick pone of cracklin' cornbread. Shoving aside a pile of pork chop bones, he crumbled the cornbread into his plate and decorated it with several large scoops of pintos. The walk in the woods that morning had not ruined his appetite.

"Not all that much to thinning timber, Mr. Patterson," he said between bites. "All you do is mark the trees you want to come out, like the diseased ones, and the crooked ones, the ones that are over-topped or forked. The cutter cuts the ones that are painted, and gives the rest of them room to grow."

Unlike Homer, John wasn't speechless, and he could do it all with a mouthful of beans and cornbread. He took another bite before asking, "Do you have somebody lined up to cut it?"

"Otis stopped me on the road the other day, and asked if we could talk about it sometime, but we didn't make any deals," Monroe said. "He had on a mountain of wood. Said he got it over on Mrs. Kyle's place. Had worms, he said."

"That's right. They were working on it pretty hard. Killed a bunch of it before she got Odis over there to salvage it," John replied. "Say, do you know anything about pulpwooders?" John asked.

"No," Monroe said, "is there something I ought to know?"

"Want some more cobbler, John," Miss Bessie broke in, seeing John's bowl empty.

"No'm, that was mighty good," John smiled rubbing his belly, "but I wouldn't mind having just a little more of that crust, and just put a few more apples on it, and pour a little juice over it and just one more scoop of that ice cream. I gotta watch what I eat, you know."

Miss Bessie filled the bowl again and passed it back.

"I couldn't tell you all of it in a month," John said, turning to Monroe, "but Odis will probably teach you more than you want to know."

Monroe lifted his eyebrows at that.

"I don't mean the Bohannon boys are dishonest," John protested. "Nothing like that. Their Mama would skin them alive if she thought they ever stole more than a chicken or two in emergencies. It's just that they have their own way of doing things, and if you try to change it, they get confused, and there's not much you can do about it."

"I sort of figured that when Tiny jumped in the well and Rooster dropped a sledge hammer on him," Monroe said dryly.

"First thing you need to do, after I get it marked, is to make a deal with Odis and the boys to cut and haul it, unless you want to get someone else," John said.

"No, I think Otis will do just fine. At least I'm used to the Bohannon boys," Monroe said. "The only thing that would surprise me is to not be surprised."

John took a big bite of cobbler and ice cream and paused while he got it in shape to swallow.

"George Fenney will hold out your part and send it to you once a week, or whenever you want it, if you ask 'em," John said.

"Sounds fair enough," Monroe said. "When will you get it marked?"

"I'll start this afternoon, if my stomach doesn't get to bothering me too much," Littlejohn said. It was known in those parts that the County Forester was possessed of a rather delicate digestive system that seemed to flare up most when the trout began to bite up on Chattooga.

Evidently the trout weren't biting that afternoon, or for the next several days, because Littlejohn showed up for lunch every day, and Miss Bessie was careful not to set out any food that might distress John's fragile metabolism. In fact, she would have been hard put to have named something that did disagree. At least she was pretty certain that steak, pork chops, chicken, beans, rice, gravy, okra, black eyed peas, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, greens, cornbread, chili peppers, onions,

biscuits, turnips, apple cobbler and ice cream weren't on the forbidden list.

She couldn't complain. John was an ideal guest. He not only ate everything she put in front of him, he appreciated it. You might say he could "make do" on most anything, as long as there was enough of it. And he could do it without ever removing the cud of chewing tobacco from his jaw. Miss Bessie concluded he must have a special place back there to store it, much like a chipmunk.

In any case, the marking was finished the day she used the last of the apples, and, as if summoned, Odis showed up. Monroe didn't have to call him. He just materialized as Littlejohn was storing his paint gun in the truck.

Pulpwooders, Monroe was to learn, have a way of doing just that; just as they have a way of transmuting themselves from one spot in your woods to another without leaving a track or cutting a tree anywhere in between. It was a thing pulpwooders had been doing long before science fiction writers invented the term "transmute", and "Beam me up, Scotty" was a phrase unheard of.

At Littlejohn's suggestion, Monroe took Odis on a "Show-me" trip to the woods, as if it were the first time he had ever been there. It was a time honored ritual, not to be omitted. Monroe and Otis walked through the woods, discussing everything but the timber. Times were hard. (They weren't, but that was beside the point.) Crops needed rain. (There was always too much or not enough.) Young folks had it too easy. (They always do.) You couldn't get anyone to work. (Monroe agreed, present company excepted.) Taxes were too high. (When were they not?) All politicians were crooks, except our own Congressmen, of course; and the Government ought to do something about poor folks.

As to poor folks, Odis didn't consider himself exactly among the destitute, unless there was an advantage to doing so. He considered himself more put upon than needy. He was

a member of that breed that can be poorer on more and richer on less, than anyone could imagine. A ten dollar bill made him rich, while a fortune could be gone in a week, with nothing to show.

When he needed money, he cut a load of wood. If he needed a lot of money, he cut a lot of wood. When he didn't, he went fishing, or just laid around. Why fix the roof if it wasn't raining? That made sense to Otis. Monroe thought Polly might change all that.

As prescribed in the ritual, timber and prices, which Odis would declare to be way down (the timber market was roaring) were not mentioned until all other subjects had been covered and they were nearly back to the truck. That is when the buyer views with alarm, while the seller points with pride. Monroe, never having played the game, wasn't too sure of the rules. Odis, however, knew them perfectly, and kept the game on course.

Otis opened the Main Event by declaring that, although the timber was short, limby, and scattered over rough ground, he thought they would try to cut it, if the price was right.

That was Monroe's cue to respond that he thought his timber was better than average, and he had plowed over every bit of that ground when it was a cotton patch. But something else got his attention just then. A vagrant rope of kudzu was inching across the forest floor, aiming a tendril toward a dominant loblolly.

As he stooped to give it a tug, he was wondering just what good timber was supposed to look like. He thought his looked pretty good. It was planted, and about as thick on the ground as it could get. Where did Odis get that "scattered" business?

He was about to ask, when the vine snapped at a nodule, and his recoiling elbow caught Otis square in the goozle. "**Glurk!**"

Monroe apologized profusely, but Odis' bargaining

power was pretty much curtailed after that. He found speaking difficult, and mere head shaking and hand pointing made it difficult to carry his point.

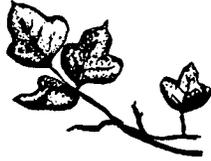
Trailing a length of kudzu around his ankle, Monroe led him back to the truck, where he nodded in agreement to the terms Monroe laid out, which were pretty much where they would have ended up, anyway.

In what must be attributed to hysteria brought on by the ache in his Adam's Apple, he even agreed to start up by the pasture gate, and work back; taking it as he came to it, not skipping around. That was a condition Littlejohn cautioned Monroe to insist upon. It certainly sounded neither difficult nor unreasonable, but Monroe was to discover later, that asking them not to skip around was as unenforcable as asking them not to breathe while on the job. Not even Polly could change that.

Skipping around, cutting little patches here there and yonder, is a pulpwooder's answer to the problem of job security. He figures, rightly, if he can cut in enough different little patches, no one else will want to come in and clean up his mess. Hence, job security. He won't get fired as long as there is hope he will clean up the mess before he leaves. They seldom do. It has been a way of life for so long in many parts of the country that there is some indication the trait may now be passed from generation to generation in the genes.

On leaving, Odis managed to croak out that they would begin in the morning.

Next morning bright and early, just as the old Dominecker Rooster announced sunrise to his harem and the world at large, Monroe heard the orange chain saw with the unpronouncable Trans-Carpathian name crank up . . . an impression Monroe and Miss Bessie would always remember as the beginning of The Great Adventure.



PUPWOODIN'

There was nothing unusual about the day Bohannon Bros. Pulpwood Co. showed up to cut Monroe Patterson's timber. Woco's battery and its warranty had long since expired, but that was not unusual for those that made pulpwood their business . . . Well, the battery hadn't actually totally died, but a ghost was about all there was left. On a good day it would generate enough power to make the starter sound like eggs frying. As long as it would do that, Odis didn't see any sense in replacing it. They simply parked on a slope, and scotched a wheel with a rock. Move the rock, and a roll down the slope was usually sufficient to coax one more restart.

In any case, there was nothing about the day that boded ill for anyone. Rooster cranked up the saw and started felling marked trees. Tiny chopped off the limbs and piled the five foot pulpwood bolts so Odis could hook the cable to them and skid them up to the truck for loading. By noon they had a pretty good pile of pulpwood cut.

Usually Odis, who always drove, parked facing down slope so they could start off forward. But on this particular occasion Woco was facing uphill near the pasture gate, necessitating a backward roll for a restart.

There were some critical features about, which might have warned of impending disaster; but in their innocence, no one gave a thought to the pole with about two dozen occupied bee martin gourds standing several feet behind, and slightly to the left of the driver's side of the truck. Nor did anyone consider the earthen ramp leading to the tool shed tractor house, which quartered in from the left of the subsequent path of Old Woco, to be a particular hazard. Just beyond the ramp

sat a tub where a mama cat was nursing her latest brood of lively kittens. The tub sat on a wide board protruding a good two feet out from the leveling rock underneath.

Down the slope another seventy-five feet was a little park like glade where three huge white oaks sheltered six bee hives. Beyond another hundred feet, the truck path T-intersected the road to Luthersville. Monroe favored the little glade for his afternoon siestas, and he was so engaged after the strenuous morning's efforts in getting the logging operation underway.

These are not the usual ingredients for catastrophe, but Fate, perhaps growing bored with the pastoral setting, decreed otherwise.

The boys had worked hard all morning felling and skidding, and had most of the first load on the truck. Rooster was on top, straightening out the load of five foot pulpwood bolts, when Otis gave Tiny the signal to remove the scotch from under the rear wheel. It was just a routine move. Roll backward, start the engine, then pull forward to the pile of wood just up the slope. Finish out the load, bind it down and head for the yard.

Alas and alack for the schemes of Man when the winds of Fortune blow ill!

Tiny left the door ajar on his side, so he could jump aboard when the engine started. Odis was behind the wheel with the clutch mashed in and the gear lever in reverse. Tiny went to the rear and kicked the rock from under the tire. Rooster braced as Woco began a fateful roll backward.

Whether Fate had taken notice, or not, no one knew, but it was a fact that A) The universal joint was suffering a bad case of metal fatigue, and B) The only functional brake shoe was on the left front wheel, and it was paper thin.

Woco lurched backward, and when Otis judged the speed to be sufficient to assure a start, he popped the clutch out, and **SPLOW!!**. Instead of a healthy engine roaring to life,

came the sound of a ferrous "adios", as U-joint and drive shaft parted company.

All depended now on the lone thin brake lining of the left front wheel. Forlorn hope! Seventeen thousand two hundred and fifty-two pounds of green loblolly pine on what was about to become scrap metal bearing down a forty percent slope against one brake shoe no thicker than the Sunday supplement? No way, Ho-zay!

Odis gave the brake pedal at least four desperate stomps before he unsuccessfully tried to abandon ship. The inside door handle on the driver's side had long since been replaced by a pair of vise grip pliers made in Taiwan. Since Otis was sitting on those pliers, he, like the Captain of the Titanic, was fated to go down with the ship.

At that instant Woco caromed off the bee-martin pole, scrambling the entire flight of about four dozen startled bee martins all at once.

Rooster, on top of the load, was clinging desperately to the wildly rotating loader boom, eyes the size of volley balls, mouth forming a distorted funnel revealing a lot of gum and an occasional monument of tooth at the first intake of air preparatory to a bellow of sheer terror later reported to have been heard as far away as Talley's Crossing.

Tiny, meanwhile had been preparing to hop aboard just as Odis popped the clutch. The ensuing jerk threw the door wide open, and when the truck caromed off the bee-martin pole, the door caught a surprised Tiny just inside his right shoulder blade, spinning him around and sending him careening full tilt down the slope straight for the earthen ramp and the open doors of the tool shed.

Nothing served to check his progress until, at near terminal velocity, head lowered and arms flailing, he disappeared into the gaping maw and crashed headlong into a solid object against the rear wall. The bull-like roar he was emitting while in flight was cut off with a short **UNKHI**, and,

with a sigh of escaping air not unlike that of a locomotive letting off steam, he collapsed in a heap amid a shower of fertilizer sacks, fruit jars, screws, nuts, bolts, and old chamber pots.

If he hadn't hit the old refrigerator Monroe used as a storage cabinet, there is no doubt Tiny would have gone clean through the back wall. As it was, he succeeded in knocking the tool shed about nine inches off its foundation, and scrambling the contents of his head along with that of the tool shed.

Outside in the sunshine, events were beginning to unfold with startling speed. The rear wheel bumped over the ramp causing the boom to make three rapid rotations with Rooster hanging on for his immortal soul. A good sized stick of pulpwood bounded loose landing squarely on the end of the board upon which the tub sat wherein it was lunch time for the litter of kittens. The leveling rock beneath acted as a fulcrum, thus, through the immutable laws of physics, the board became a launching pad for a mama cat and five feeding kittens, flinging them into a suborbital flight only slightly higher than the lowest flying squadron of martins. For a bit the air was full of bird feathers and cat hair, punctuated by a cacophony of human distress sounds, bird chattering and caterwauling.

Monroe was jarred awake just about between the time Tiny sailed into the corn crib and the cats reached the apogee of their flight. For one frozen moment he was rooted to the spot, then the primordial urge of self-preservation impelled Monroe's aging legs to take flight. For a man well over three score, Monroe was pretty agile. He made it behind one of the big oaks just as it began to rain cats, and the runaway truck rumbled by.

With one more swoop, the boom unloaded Rooster into a relatively soft landing on a lower limb of Monroe's tree. Before Monroe could grasp the significance of the Armageddon unfolding before his eyes, the mama cat and five kittens hit the ground and bounded for the tree right up

Monroe's back and out on a limb opposite Rooster's. There they clung in terror, backs arched and hair on end as Woco with Odis now the sole passenger smashed through the bee hives, pulverized the mail box, shot across the main road, and finally came to rest tilted up in the side ditch halfway down the hill to the Bears Swamp Creek bridge.

Then there was silence. Complete dead silence, save the sound of escaping steam from beneath Woco's uptilted hood, and the far off cawing of a crow. The survivors turned to stare at each other in addled incomprehension of the Doomsday Express that had barely missed them. A trickle of blood from a cat scratch started down Monroe's back, but he didn't feel it. For the moment time was suspended. Earth stood still on its axis. For an infinity the silence remained. Then the crow cawed again; two more caws, and a soft moan from the tool shed answered shortly by another from the uptilted cab of the truck.

Monroe stared at Rooster still dangling from the limb, and they both turned their eyes toward the mama cat and five kittens hugging the limb that was their refuge, eyes still wide and frightened, hair on end. Then a second moan from the truck floated across the soft summer air. The mama cat relaxed and, gaining her aplomb, began to lick her paws and each kitten one at a time.

Another feeble groan from the tool shed this time was answered by a piercing scream from the truck. It seems that even so alert a creature as the honey bee can be taken off guard, but it is axiomatic that the reaction time of a surprised bee hive is milliseconds faster than that of a NASCAR pit crew. It didn't take six amalgamated hives of bees long to convene, identify the source of their difficulties, and agree on a course of action.

Otis popped out of the cab spring loaded and winging it for the creek with six homogenized populations of outraged honey bees in hot pursuit.

A few days later, the dust had settled and peace restored to the scene. Most of the martins were back in the gourds; the bee hives restored, and the mama cat had moved her kittens to a safer haven under the back steps. Tiny was still showing two black eyes, and a large grimy patch protruded from beneath his cap.

Odis wasn't wearing a cap yet. The swelling from the bee stings had raised his hat size to about a 24. Rooster was unscarred, except perhaps mentally. He seemed unduly wary, and wherever they were, kept a leery eye on the other two.

The first order of business was to repair the damage to Old Woco. It was fairly easy to get to, since the upturned portion exposed the broken assembly for easy replacement.

Monroe and Otis went to the junkyard for the parts for which Monroe paid \$43.12.

"These parts are good as new," the man said. "Came off a truck just driven by an old lady to deliver peaches to the Curb Market."

Odis thought that little old lady sure got around.

Monroe also paid \$12 for a new battery. "This one's on me," he said. "I don't want any more rolling starts."

The repairs were made in jig time. Otis and Rooster were pretty good with wrenches. If something didn't fit, they called Tiny, who gave it a shove and made it fit.

A passing road scraper pulled Woco out of the ditch for \$2, which Monroe also paid. After a full summer's labor Monroe was out \$57.12, and was beginning to wonder if seven-cent cotton was such a bad deal after all.

What remained of the fender was pulled off the front tire by Tiny, and Woco, his former splendor somewhat tarnished, was ready to roll.

Although the steering had developed about two more turns of slack, Odis pronounced himself satisfied with the results. Most of the scattered wood was rounded up, reloaded, and the boys were off to George Fenney's Woodyard with the

first load. And by Labor Day weekend, several more loads had gone in. Otis had repaid Monroe most of what he had borrowed, and things were looking a little better.

It seemed though, that since the accident, Woco had developed certain peculiarities. While the front end was practically astride the center line, the rear end was wiping out mail boxes. Dogs wouldn't even give chase, because they didn't know which end to bark at.

Monroe was beginning to understand John's remark that Odis would teach him whatever he needed to know about pulpwooders, but he wasn't expecting a post-graduate course.



POLLY

The fat man at the corner booth by the window looked up and nodded as Monroe entered the White Star. "Hello, Ogden," Monroe said, seating himself at the counter. There was no one else in the restaurant, but Ogden Hildebrandt was not a person with whom Monroe ordinarily chose to share coffee and conversation. Hildebrandt was a local politician, lawyer, business man and reputed to have a finger in nearly every pie in town.

"You're Mr. Patterson, aren't you?" asked the waitress, wiping off the counter and setting a cup of coffee before him. She was dressed neatly, had her blond hair back in a pony tail and wore little make-up. Her strong white teeth shown brightly in a pretty smile that was friendly without being flirty.

"Yes, I am," Monroe answered. "How did you know?"

"I heard about you. Otis told me," she said blushing a little.

"Oh, then you must be Polly," Monroe said. "I've heard about you, too."

"Did Odis tell you?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," Monroe replied. "It was the boys. They think Otis is a little . . ." he broke off. He was going to say, "crazy for not marrying you," but decided that would be meddling in business that wasn't his own. Then added, "The boys think you are very nice."

"Oh, I appreciate Tiny and Rooster," she said. "I didn't think Odis would have mentioned me. He never does, much," she sighed. "How are they doing down there in your woods?" she asked.

"Well, after things finally got going, they're doing pretty

well," Monroe answered. "At least they haven't turned over any bee hives lately, and Otis got the brakes fixed when he had to overhaul the truck."

"I know. I made him do it," Polly said. "I don't see how he's kept from getting killed."

"Or killing somebody," Monroe added, thinking of his narrow escape.

Monroe was anything but a match-maker, and he definitely was not a meddler; but he was thinking the world might be a little safer place if Odis was curbed a little bit by someone as sensible as Polly seemed to be.

"You all just moved back here, didn't you?" Polly asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, we moved away a long time before you were born, but I think I remember your Daddy. He was just a kid when we left," Monroe said. "Isn't his name Paul?"

"Yessir. Paul Craker. He's a loom-fixer over at the cotton mill, and my Mama's name is Wanda. She was Wanda Kessler. Did you know her?"

"No, but I knew a bunch of Kessler's that lived up toward the mountain," he said.

"That's them," Polly said. "There was a whole big family, and my granddaddy ran a sawmill."

"You don't look much like that family. As I remember, they were big folks, and most of them dark headed," Monroe said.

"Well, actually, I'm adopted; so I don't guess I'd look like any of those folks," Polly said.

"I didn't know that," Monroe felt a little awkward.

"Oh, that's all right," Polly laughed. "I've always known it, and I couldn't have picked better parents, if I'd had a thousand chances."

"I can believe that," Monroe said, thinking about that big family that worked from sun up until sun down, living on pinto beans, fatback and all the love in the world. Those kids never

got in trouble. Kin, or no kin, Monroe thought Polly took after them in a lot of other ways besides size and coloring. Nevertheless, he was glad when Hildebrandt interrupted to pay for his coffee.

"Keeping the wheels turning, Ogden?" Monroe asked.

"Tryin' to," he said. As he was leaving, another man came through the door and went to the table he had just vacated.

"Hey, mister! Is this yours?" the man said, holding up a large manila envelope Ogden had obviously left on the table.

"Oh, yes. Thank you," Ogden said and went out the door.

When Polly came back from delivering a cup of coffee to her new customer, Monroe took the opportunity to return to the original subject.

"Polly, how long have you known Otis?" he asked.

"Oh, a long time, Mr. Patterson, but I've only been going out with him a little over three and a half years," Polly answered.

"Ummmm. Steady?"

"Yes. I know. You're thinkin' three and a half years is a long time for a girl not to be asked to get married, aren't you?" Polly asked.

"Well, most men do make up their minds a little quicker," Monroe said, "and it sure doesn't take Odis that long to make up his mind about most things."

"Oh, Odis has made up his mind, all right. He just doesn't know it," Polly said with a bit of determination showing.

"It might be that he is just scared of preachers," Monroe said.

"That could be," Polly said skeptically. "He does change the subject every time someone mentions preachers or weddings." Then she added, "Do you think I just let him take me too much for granted, Mr. Patterson?"

Monroe took another sip of coffee and reached in his pocket for his pipe.

Lighting up, he said, "You know, Polly, I enjoy this old pipe. I always know where it is, and I always know it will be there; but how do you think I would feel sometime if I reached for it and it wasn't there?"

"You'd probably start lookin' pretty hard," she answered.

"Sure would," Monroe replied.

"Do you think if Otis came lookin' sometime, an' I wasn't here, it would make him think?" she asked.

"Well, you might ponder on it some," Monroe said.

Monroe left a tip and went to pick up Bessie at the Beauty Parlor. On the way, he stopped by the hardware store to pick up a shovel to replace the one that was missing.



FORBIDDEN FRUIT

"Rooster, you been in my lunch again?" Tiny complained. "That's the second time this week!"

"I ain't touched your lunch, Tiny. I keep tellin' you that," Rooster retorted.

"Well, **somebody's** been in it! Looky here. Two of my favorite san'wiches is gone. There ain't but five in here now," he lamented. "The peanut butter and boloney, and the catfish and jelly ones're both gone!"

"In that case, I feel sorry for the poor fool that stole 'em," Rooster said. "If you want to know who got 'em, just look for somebody with a belly-ache."

"It ain't bad enough that Ma's put me on a diet," Tiny groused, "somebody done et my best san'wiches." Tiny may have been feeling badly about his two missing sandwiches, but it didn't stop him from demolishing the other five.

The boys were taking their lunch break while Otis had gone to the wood yard with a load.

"At least they didn't get my dessert," Tiny said as he finished off the raw onion, molasses, cheese and dill pickle model he had made himself. Tiny looked around, still not satisfied.

"I'm still hungry," he said.

"Then I'd better go hide Old Bet. Next thing I know, you'll be eating her hind leg with mustard," Rooster said.

"Naw, I don't won't no mule meat," Tiny said, "but I'm still hungry. I wish I had a- LOOK!" Tiny was pointing out across the neighbor's pasture.

"What. I don't see anyth-"

"That tree!" Tiny said excitedly. "It's an apple tree, an'

look at all them apples on it!"

Rooster looked in the direction Tiny was pointing, and indeed there was a loaded apple tree out in the middle of the forty acre pasture bordering the Patterson land.

History records stronger men than Tiny and Rooster being lured into difficulties by no less than the same fruit; forbidden though it was. Of course, Adam also had the blandishments of Eve and a reptile to goad him on; but then, no one had stolen Adam's catfish and jelly sandwich.

In the time it took Rooster to stick the double-bitted axe he was sharpening into a stump, Tiny, driven by acute hunger spasms, was across the fence and halfway up the hill before Rooster caught up with him.

In any case, it is highly doubtful that Adam had resisted temptation any longer than Tiny and Rooster. Besides, it never occurred to them that taking some of those apples constituted stealing. It was merely sharing Nature's Bounty' no more, no less; and Tiny was always willing to share Nature's, or anyone else's, bounty. Nor did they stop to ponder why such a fine crop of apples, in plain sight of the road, remained apparently unmolested. They were about to find out why.

On the far side of the tree, out of view of Tiny and Rooster, chewing his cud and ruminating over his herd of heifers, lay Old Fred; a bull of immense proportions, part Freisian and part whatever-jumped-the-fence. Fred also possessed well honed territorial instincts and a proclivity to defend same.

Approaching from Fred's blind side, not only were Tiny and Rooster unaware of Fred's presence; Fred was unaware of theirs . . . until Tiny shook the tree, and it began to rain apples.

Now, Farmer Brandt, who owned old Fred, never made any claims as to Fred's intelligence. Bulls are bred for purposes not requiring intelligence; but Farmer Brandt would, in a heartbeat, have bet the farm on Fred's reaction to being pummeled with apples, and he would have won.

In much less time than it takes to tell it, Fred's mood changed from serene to puzzlement to irritation to about eighteen hundred and ninety pounds of outraged beef. A bull's way of dealing with a problem is very direct. First, locate it. Second, stomp it. That settled, Fred set out to do so.

Somewhere between Fred's puzzlement stage and the dawning of irritation, Rooster anticipated outrage as being the final result, and, not awaiting the outcome, started winging it for the fence and safety, scattering apples in his wake.

Tiny, owing perhaps to his malnurtured condition, reacted a little slower, and caught himself staring straight into Fred's slightly off-color red eye. Tiny didn't exactly burn up the books in school, but he immediately perceived Fred's intentions, computed the fifteen hundred pound weight disadvantage, and reached a conclusion similar to Rooster's.

Down the hill they thundered. Tiny and Rooster not reasoning why, they only knew it was do, or . . . they didn't have time to think about it.

While Tiny was gaining slightly on Rooster, Fred was gaining faster on both. No need to consider fences. They wouldn't make it, but forty yards from the fence and squarely in their path stood the lone survivor of what had once been a small grove of trees Farmer Brandt had left to shade his cattle. The others had blown over in a spring windstorm.

Rooster might make it, but Tiny, even if he could get there, with all his bulk, could never climb the tree. Besides, there was only room for one, anyway.

With a burst of speed that must have exhausted his entire supply of adrenalin for a month, Rooster leaped for a low limb and caught it! Fred and Tiny thundered by, and Tiny dove for the only stumphole big enough to afford safety, not a bull's whisker ahead of Fred!

Safe for the moment, but only a moment! While Tiny laid low in his stump hole, Fred, outrage whetted by frustration, wheeled in search of a target upon which to unload

it. Spotting Rooster dangling from the limb, Fred attacked the tree in an effort to shake him out.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM! By his third charge he had nearly succeeded, when Tiny dashed out of the stumphole straight for the tree, distracting Fred at the crucial second. One more charge would have dislodged Rooster . . . permanently.

Around and around the tree ran the short stout man, with the large red-eyed bull in hot pursuit, but unable to make the short turns necessary to pin his prey. About the time Rooster regained his original handhold and improved it a little, Tiny made a dash for the stump hole, and again made it by less than the proverbial feline's setae.

Fred, returning to attack the tree, was once more on the brink of success, when, out of the stumphole Tiny charged in a repeat of his previous sterling performance. And again the perilous return trip to the stumphole was close, but no cigar for Fred. That time Rooster succeeded in gaining the crotch of the tree where, unless Fred could push the tree over, he would be safe. Fred, however, was convinced he could uproot the tree, and proceeded to give it his best effort.

To Rooster's unbelieving eyes, Tiny again emerged from the stumphole to tempt Fred in another game of Run-Around-The-Treesy. Even Fred was startled. Rooster, however grateful he was for Tiny's intrepid bravery, couldn't let him risk life and limb again.

"STAY IN THE STUMPHOLE, TINY! I'M SAFE! HE CAN'T SHAKE ME OUT NOW!" Rooster shouted.

"I CAN'T THERE'S A SKUNK IN THE STUMPHOLE!" Tiny shouted back, and veered away from Rooster's tree, setting a now-or-never course for the five strands of banjo tight barbed wire and safety.

Had the football coach Tiny had given directions to that day in the field been present with a stop watch, he would have had the choice of declaring his stop watch to be broken, or go completely bonkers in the knowledge that this potential ticket

to a National Championship was unattainable. Tiny broke all existing records for the 40 yard dash that day by a good margin.

Even that effort would have been doomed to failure had it not been for two mitigating factors: 1) Fred's total astonishment at seeing Tiny come out to give him another chance, and 2) Rooster's having momentarily further distracted Fred by whopping him on the flank with the one apple remaining in his pocket after his precipitate departure. Fred had given the tree one more whop before setting out in pursuit of Tiny.

The finale was truly one for the books. While football coaches would have gaped in stunned disbelief at Tiny's 40 yard dash time, the dive he made for the fence at the end of his run was truly Olympian.

Fred was all but in his hip pocket when Tiny, realizing there would be no call for seconds, launched himself into an arc calculated to clear the highest strand of wire by a good two and a half feet. In his haste and the necessities of the moment, he can hardly be faulted for having miscalculated slightly. He actually reached the apogee of his flight about one good body length before clearing the wire . . . and was in a rapidly descending glide angle when his body, about midway between two posts, struck the topmost strand of newly stretched, tightly stapled, stoutly posted barbed wire fence.

It was wire, made in the US of A, pulled to its taut condition by Tiny himself, in company with his Brothers and Mr. Patterson. This time, under the most trying conditions, said wire extended to the outermost limits of its strength by the weight of Tiny's body in flight.

Would it part? Would it break? It did not; nor did the locust posts to which the wire was stapled. The posts bent; the wire stretched and strained . . . then in a flash returned to its original and intended position, thus launching Tiny into a newer and higher arc to which was added a half gainer with a

full twist before Tiny's body disappeared into the kudzu thicket!

Fred, applying full emergency brakes, stopped just short of the fence and wheeled just in time to spot Rooster disappearing over the hill and out of range in the opposite direction. Fred's day was done. With all intruders banished, he returned to the shade of his tree in sight of his harem.

* * * * *

Otis, returning from the woodyard, had picked up Monroe at the gate, and they arrived just in time to witness the final moments of the drama just related. They were merely gaping by-standers and played no part whatsoever.

However, the astonishment of the barefoot grizzled figure in the many-patched shirt, could hardly be measured, when the ton of flesh reeking of the musk of a hundred garbage pits came crashing through the roof of the kudzu tunnel. Tiny had narrowly missed squashing the gnome-like figure as he settled to a relatively soft landing on the floor of the passage. Recovering before Tiny did, it grabbed up the tools it had dropped, and disappeared rapidly down the dark tunnel, making hardly a sound in its hasty departure.

Otis and Monroe, marking the spot on the surface of the green sea where Tiny disappeared, jumped out of the truck and ran as close as they could get to the spot.

"Tiny! You all right?" Odis called.

No answer came until about the fifth hail, Tiny moaned, and they could hear him thrashing around.

"Hey! Where am I! Get me outta here!" Tiny yelled.

"Are you all right?" Otis asked again, a little anxiety in his voice. "Smells like something's died in there."

"Get me out. I don't even know where I am," Tiny called.

"Hang on a minute!" Otis ran to the truck and returned pulling the loader cable tied to a small stick of pulpwood.

"Here catch this!" he called, heaving the stick toward the spot Tiny's voice seemed to be coming from. A resounding "thunk" told him it had gotten to Tiny.

"Wrap that around you and we'll winch you out," Odis called.

When he felt a strong tug on the cable, Otis engaged the winch and dragged Tiny out of the thicket.

Once safely out, he lay gasping like a beached whale for several minutes.

"Odis, you ain't goin' t' believe this, but there's little green men in that kudzu thicket, an' they been stealin' my lunch," Tiny said, pulling himself up on one elbow, and looking deadly serious.

Monroe and Otis looked at each other meaningfully and nodded in mutual understanding.

"Sure thing, Tiny," Odis said.

After everything Tiny had been through that day, is it any wonder that Otis and Monroe put down Tiny's raving to a bump on the head, which he had undeniably suffered?

Meantime, Rooster, returning to the place he and Tiny had eaten lunch, was unable to locate the axe. But he found the stump where he had left it, the mark of the blade easily visible.

When the boys came to work the next morning, they found someone had slashed the tires on Old Woco.



LITTLEFOOT

"I can't he'p what you say, there ain't no setch a thing as Lepper-coons!" Rooster said.

"But I tell you I seen it!" Tiny shouted back. "I purty near landed on top of it, an' he stood there a-gapin' at me for a minute, an' it was green an' bushy. Then he run off and I didn't see 'im no more."

"You gonna have to stop eatin' them souse meat and fig persarve san'wiches," Rooster said. "It's got you seein' things."

"It ain't no san'wiches, and it ain't no bump on the head. I tell you it stood there and looked at me," Tiny insisted. "An' it's been stealin' my lunch, too."

"Did it steal your lunch again today?" Rooster asked.

"No, but that don't mean it didn't get it yesterday," Tiny said.

"Well, if it et your lunch yesterday, it's probably died today, and you won't have to worry about it no more. An' you better get this load ready before Odis gets back from the yard," Rooster said.

"Where's the axe?" Tiny asked.

"I don't know. I can't find it," Rooster said. "Lop them limbs off with the saw. We'll look for the axe later."

"See there, it stole the axe, too," Tiny said.

"Maybe it got tired of eatin' you dumb san'wiches, an' decided to eat the axe. If it did, I don't blame 'im," Rooster said. "He'll likely live a lot longer."

"Who you reckon it was slashed our tires?" Tiny asked. "It was that Lepper-can, sure as I'm standin' here."

"Well, if'n he didn't eat the axe, I guess he coulda done it with it," Rooster said. "I think it was those Hiatt boys up to

no good. They had it in fer us ever since Otis got Mizz Kyle's timber stead of them."

"Ole Hi Hat's a low down skunk, all right, an' not a bit above pullin' stuff like that, but I don't think he was the one what done it. They been cuttin' plumb on the other side of Ebenezer. They wouldn't a come all the way over here to cut our tires," Tiny said.

"You can't never tell what that bunch woulda done," Rooster said, sticking to his guns. "'Sides, it shore as hell warn't no little green man with bushy whiskers. I'll tell you that much."

"You ever hear tell of them big critters out west what's supposed to swaller sheep with one gulp?" Tiny asked.

"I heard of 'em, but I ain't b'lievin' in no Bigfoots no more'n I'm believin' about no Lepper-cawns," Rooster said, sitting down on a stump facing Tiny.

"They's both fairy tales." Rooster was hard to shake. He had enough things happen to him because of his brothers, without having to believe in elves, fairies, gnomes, ogres, trolls and bean-stalk giants.

"Whew! What's that stink! Didn't you get all a that skunk washed off?" Rooster said, wrinkling his nose.

"Naw. I didn't wash a-tall," Tiny announced. "If'n it didn't like that skunk smell the first time, he ain't gonna like it no better now. On top a-that, I done stuck my rabbit's foot, my lucky penny and my four leaf clover down in Granmaw's assfeddity bag and hung it on my neck." Tiny dangled the bag under Rooster's nose.

"Dangnation, Tiny! Cut it out!" Rooster exclaimed. "I'm gonna stand over here 'til the wind shifts. You attractin' buzzards!" Rooster said, moving to a new location.

Unseen by the boys, and hidden in a thick copse of underbrush, a pair of sharp brown eyes followed their every move; alert ears picked up every word. That it was downwind from Tiny and Rooster is attested by the fact that its nose twitched at the breeze-wafted scent.

Then it crept furtively out of its cover, risking detection as it moved stealthily toward the two lunch bags sitting at the foot of a tree several feet from where Tiny and Rooster were holding their conversation. It had just grasped Rooster's lunch, when Rooster spotted him.

"Hey!-" Rooster yelled. Tiny jumped up, and they chased the creature into the swamp.

* * * * *

"Hey!," the voice yelled. "Get that wreck out of the way and let a real truck unload!"

The voice belonged to the dark stubble-bearded head protruding from the driver's window of the beat up dark blue truck that had just pulled onto the yard. Hi Hat Hiatt was wearing the beat up plug hat that was his trade mark; a stub of a cigar clenched between his teeth.

Otis climbed out of the cab and sauntered over to Hiatt's truck.

There had been bad blood between Odis and Hi Hat since the time back on the schoolyard at recess, Hiatt was bullying Tiny and Otis had beat him up.

They had never come to blows since the schoolyard incident, but Hi Hat had gotten in his licks over the years in other ways. Matters had stood almost even until Odis had bought Mrs. Kyle's timber that Hiatt had been dickering for, and thought he had sewed up. Of all the people Odis knew, Hi Hat was the leading candidate for tire slasher. Even at that, Odis couldn't out and out accuse him without being more sure than he was, but he thought it wouldn't do any harm to let Hiatt know how his mind was running.

"You been over in Bears swamp lately, Hi Hat?" Otis inquired.

"No, and I ain't cut your tires, either," Hi Hat answered.

"Then How'd you know they'd been cut?" Odis asked.

"Everybody in the country knowed you had to go buy four new ones this morning," Hiatt answered. "I even know what you had to pay fer 'em, an' you got 'em on a cradit."

"Least I **got** cradit," Otis said.

"If y' got 'nuff cash, you don't need cradit," Hi Hat answered.

"I suppose you got cash," Odis said.

"I got a-nuff t' buy a tire 'th'out cradit," Hi Hat said.

"If I ever catch you messin' 'round my truck, I'll shoot your britches off n'en you won't have no pocket to tote it in," Odis said.

Otis's load had been put on the rack car by then, and Woco stood empty. He climbed in and headed back to the woods.

Everyone on the yard had overheard their conversation, and to those that hadn't heard, Hi Hat gave his version. Soon it was all through the pulpwooding community that another feud was brewing between Odis and Hi Hat, Bohannons and Hiatts.

It was not a good time for Polly to decide to become a little less unfriendly toward Hi Hat. But then she hadn't heard about the new feud brewing.

* * * * *

"I see in the 'Crier' that Hartwell Hamm passed away last week," Monroe said. "Wasn't he some kin to Tidge Hamm?" he asked.

"They were brothers, I think," Bessie said as she cleared away the last of the dinner dishes.

"Whatever became of Tidge?" Monroe asked. "Wasn't he involved in some sort of scandal in that Mortgage Company business?"

"He was Treasurer of the Company, and he and a bunch of money disappeared at the same time, I heard."

"How did you know all this?" Monroe asked, looking up somewhat surprised. For someone who never gossiped, Miss Bessie was uncommonly well informed.

"Well, if you go to the beauty parlor and just keep our ears open, you don't have to ask; especially if you are sitting between Molly Sue Bieler and Agnes Wagner," Bessie said.

"What else have you learned 'just keeping quiet'," Monroe asked, still slightly amazed at his well informed wife.

"I don't think anything was ever found of Tallmadge, that was his real name, and the money never showed up, either," Bessie answered.

"I didn't know that," Monroe said.

"Know what?" Bessie asked.

"That 'Tallmadge' was his real name. No wonder we called him 'Tidge'," Monroe said. "I can't believe he stole all that money," Monroe continued. "He was a strange little cuss in school. Smart as a whip. Never used to dance at the dances. Just used to sit there and watch and grin." Monroe shook his head sadly, "I guess you never can tell. What else did you learn from Molly Sue and Agnes?"

"Well, Hartwell never accused his brother, but it must have broken his heart, anyway. That was when he just left the firm and went to New York," Bessie informed him in words that sounded exactly like Molly Sue's.

Anxious to tell Bessie something she hadn't already heard, Monroe said, "According to the 'Crier', he once said, 'The Cotton Business in South Carolina wasn't so much different from the Stock Exchange. Yankees are just like a bale of cotton,' he said, 'and a lot easier to pick.'" Monroe chuckled, "He must have picked a bunch of them, because it says he was president of a bank and had a seat on the Stock Exchange."

"I wonder who will get all his money?" Bessie said. "Agnes didn't think he had any relatives living here, now, and may not have any at all. She said the whole family just died out."

"I guess the lawyers will get most of it and the government will get the rest," Monroe sighed.

* * * * *

"Head 'im off, Tiny!" Rooster shouted, "He's headed toward the swamp!"

They could hear the sound of a large animal breaking through the brush ahead of them, and once in awhile got a glimpse of a large black form. Whatever it was got to the swamp ahead of them, and when Tiny and Rooster arrived at the little path that led along the edge of the swamp at the foot of the bluff, there was nothing in sight, and they couldn't hear a sound. Whatever it was had vanished, and so had Rooster's lunch.

"That warn't no little green man, Tiny. **That** was a dog!" Rooster said. "A great big black dog, an' that's what's been stealin' yo' lunch! Now he's done went and got mine," Rooster lamented. "I guess he got tired a-tryin' to digest yours."

"That wasn't it," Tiny said, defending his culinary concoctions. "Your's was just closter to him."

"What are you talkin' about, 'closter'! If'n I hadn't yelled when I did, he was gonna pee on yours!" Rooster exclaimed.

"Now I guess you will have to eat some of my lunch," Tiny said. The idea appealed to Rooster less than it did to Tiny.

However, when they got back up to the top of the hill, they discovered it was a moot question.

Tiny's lunch was missing, too, and there in the soft earth beside the tree was a perfect imprint of a bare foot, size six.

"Littlefoot," Tiny breathed.



PLOTTING COURSES

Ogden Hildebrandt had two sets of papers spread before him on his desk. One appeared to be a set of maps. The other was a legal sized document in a blue cover. It was a deed of trust to the Hamm, Penrose, Carter, Taylor and Hamm Mortgage Co., which he controlled. He had bought out old man Penrose right after the crash in '29. Taylor and Carter had been shuffled off to the Foothills Convalescent Home for the Gracefully Aging, and Hamm and Hamm had long since withdrawn from the Company; Tallmadge under a cloud of suspicion of embezzlement simply disappeared, and Hartwell to seek greener pastures on Wall Street.

The solid mask behind heavily hooded eyelids broke ever so slightly into a self-satisfied smirk as he read the description of the land in the deed and compared it to the map. There were some definite possibilities, if he could get control of the land, and he was pretty sure he could manage those hillbillies. If not, he had other ways.

The map would have to be returned to the State Highway office before it was missed. At this time the new highway was still in the early planning stages and strictly confidential, not having been released to the public yet. There were a lot of things about locating a highway that weren't revealed until plans were a little more firm. No need upsetting a lot of people and running land prices up until things were settled. That things would be settled was pretty certain. He didn't sit on the Highway Committee for nothing.

He replaced the deed in a private strong box and locked it. Then he rolled up the maps and reached for the phone.

* * * * *

"Honestly, John, I don't think I have ever heard of anything like this before," Homer Griffin was holding forth as he, Monroe and John Littlejohn inspected the logging job and the kudzu control operation.

The scene before them was of a decidedly sick kudzu patch, but a number of new green tendrils indicated that life was a long way from being extinguished.

Littlejohn loosed a stream of tobacco juice at some of the green leaves that would surely be withered by it. Not even kudzu was hardy enough to digest John's tobacco juice.

"How did you discover these tunnels, Mr. Patterson?" John asked.

"I just fell into one the first day I was out here," Monroe said. "I thought it was strange, but I didn't make much of it. Still haven't," he said after a pause.

"I told Mr. Patterson it just beat the daylights out of me," Homer put in. "It makes you wonder just what all kind of life there is in a kudzu thicket, and what goes on in there," Homer added. "What do you think made those tunnels, John?" Homer asked.

"Well, Tiny says he saw a 'Lepper-coon' in there the other day, and they sure found a clear footprint," John smiled. "What do you think Tiny saw, Mr. Pat?"

"I'm sure Tiny **thinks** he saw a 'Lepper-coon', just like he said; but after all Tiny had just been soaked in skunk juice, chased across a forty acre pasture by a mad bull, and turned a double flip by a barb wire fence. That's apt to make you see a lot of things," Monroe said.

"What about the footprint?" Homer asked.

"Probably some child," Monroe said, "but it still makes you wonder what a kid was doing out here in the woods."

"At this stage of the game, I'd as soon believe in little green men as anything else," Homer said, "because I just don't

have any other answer for it. I can't find anything in the manuals about it, and I've called Clemson to see what they have to say."

"What did they say, Homer?" John asked.

"They haven't said anything so far. I think they think I'm either crazy or drunk. When I started talking about tunnels in kudzu, they thought 'kudzu' was a place in Indo-China that had a lot of caves, and referred me to the Geography Department! I don't know what the world is coming to. I didn't know what to say to that. It just left me kinda speechless, so I hung up. It makes me so mad when people don't listen. There I was trying to make the fool understand that I wanted the Ag Department, and she was sending me to the Geography people, as if I didn't know who I wanted to speak to! I get so outdone, it just leaves me."

"Homer, why don't you get in there and follow one of those tunnels out to see where it leads?" John asked.

"Are you kidding me! There could be all kinds of things in there, an' I wouldn't want to meet anything bigger'n a rabbit in the middle of that thicket. No thanks!" Homer said.

"What about turning the cows and goats back in there? Do you think it would be safe?" Monroe asked.

"I don't see why not," Homer answered. "The pellets have all melted, and the acid is out of their system by now. Not much more they can do but eat kudzu. The more they eat, the better it will be."

"That sounds good to me," Monroe said, "I'm getting tired of feeding those critters."

"I think we need to let the cows eat all they can and see if we can't get a good burn on it this fall," John said. "You got pretty good kill around the edges, and first frost will make crispy critters out of the greenery. If we can get hot enough burn this fall, it will be a lot easier to control next spring."

"I'd hate to burn up my timber in order to kill the kudzu," Monroe said.

"We'll make sure we get a good line around it before we touch it off," John said, "and we'll start burning at the top of the slope and burn downhill instead of starting at the bottom and letting the fire go up the bluff. That way the fire will burn slower and will be easier to control."

"I want to be here to see what comes running out of there," Homer said. "Then I'm going to call those fools down at Clemson and **tell** them what makes tunnels in kudzu; and they can pass it on to whatever department they think might be interested. Hey! What's that moving over there!" Homer pointed at the kudzu patch.

Monroe and Littlejohn peered in the direction he was pointing, but all that could be seen was the lush green blanket of kudzu, shimmering in the sun and rippling softly in the late summer breeze.

"Must have been Tiny's 'Littlefoot'," John said.

* * * * *

The cave in the bluff was completely hidden from sight by the wall of kudzu that cascaded over the escarpment from above, and reached to the footpath that ran along the edge of the swamp and the base of the bluff. The path to the entrance of the cave tunneled through the kudzu along the face of the bluff, and was reached from the open pathway only by following the rivulet of the spring run that crossed the open path before flowing into Bearswamp Creek through the swamp. There was no way for the outsider to detect the presence of the cave, or the path leading to it. The thick tangle guarded its secrets well, never divulging a single clue.

Inside the cave a figure was hunched over a bench, working with a pile of pasteboard cylinders and joints of bamboo cut into about two foot lengths. Over in a corner, stretched out on a straw stuffed mattress, was a large black Labrador; unmoving, but eyes alert, fixed on its master, who was deeply engrossed in what he was doing.

The cave was lighted by a steady blue flame burning in a lamp made from an old 1931 Chevrolet hubcap hanging directly over the work bench and reflected from a piece of old mirror. A mat woven from kudzu vines hung over the entrance, preventing light from escaping. The cave was cooled by fresh air filtering down from the springhead farther back inside the cavern. In spite of the fresh air, odors accumulating in the cave attested that the present activity was not directed toward the manufacture of perfume.

The little spring run fed into a stone cistern elevated several feet from the floor of the cave, and from which several pipes, running in various directions, emerged. A small copper pot alcohol still bubbled away on the bench in one corner, its clear product dripping steadily into a large fruit jar. Several jars, filled and capped, standing along a shelf behind the still indicated that the still had been in fairly constant use.

Rising from the powdery material in a tub on the floor, was the unmistakable odor of bat guano, which the pile of charcoal nearby could not quite totally absorb.

The hunched figure was hard at work. It took quite a while, but his concentration never wavered until he had completed his task. Then relaxing, and pushing aside a pile of the cylinders, the figure at the bench turned to his companion on the mattress in the corner.

"Sam, they think they are going to burn us out," he said, then chuckled, "We'll see about that."

Sam's long pink tongue lolled out of his mouth in what could only be described as a canine grin. His tail wagged a time or two to confirm it.

* * * * *

"No, Otis, I've got some other things I want to do tonight," Polly said to the phone.

It was the first time in three years she and Odis had missed going to the movie on that night. It was a standing

date, but Polly had been thinking about what Monroe had said about his pipe, and decided in the interest of jarring Otis awake, she would alter their plans. In fact she had let him know that her plans did not include him at all. Actually, they didn't include anyone. She had nothing to do but go home, wash her hair, read a magazine and go to bed.

Polly's sudden change of their long standing plans puzzled Otis, and, for his part, decided to go by the White Star about the time Polly got off, and see what was so important to her that it didn't include him.

Hi Hat Hiatt had a new twenty dollar bill he was sure would burn a hole in his pocket, if he didn't go out and spend it. So, putting on his one clean shirt and brushing off his plug hat, which he tweaked to a cocky angle on his head, he lit a fresh cigar stub and headed toward the White Star and a beer.

A young couple, he in a brand new blue serge suit, and she in a white party frock, were sitting quietly at a table in the back finishing a light supper. Polly was cleaning off the last table of the evening before Patti Sue Holden came in to relieve her. As she was resetting the table, the young couple paid their tab and went out leaving her a 35 cent tip. When Polly went over to clean off their table, she found the pink carnation corsage the young lady had unpinned and left at the side of the table while they ate.

Polly grabbed it up and ran out the door to catch them, careening squarely into the open arms of Hi Hat Hiatt, who was just reaching for the door as Polly ran out.

This was the scene Odis came upon as he rounded the corner. Otis blinked in disbelief. Polly in the arms of Hi Hat Hiatt! Eyeing the corsage in Polly's hand and the clean shirt on Hi Hat's back, Odis added two and two and came up with a badly warped four. Striding forward, he brushed aside a stunned Polly and decked Hi Hat with a ham sized fist squarely on the bazoo; blood, a couple of teeth and a cigar butt flying.

Then he turned to face Polly, who had recovered

quickly, and was met by a well placed right hook from a fist that seemed much too small and dainty to pack such a wallop that it left him seated on the sidewalk, eye closed and head spinning. Whatever he had wanted to say to her could wait.

Where had Polly developed a punch like that? Then he remembered how she had put a stop to remarks about "Polly want a Craker" at recess.

Smiling sweetly, Polly handed the corsage to the dumbfounded young couple standing beside their car; went inside, got her coat and went home.

Hi Hat came to enough to raise his head, look at Odis, who was still trying to get his right eye to focus, and stammer out, "H-How did you find out that I-I-" Then he lapsed back into unconsciousness. Hi Hat, who had seldom possessed more than an un-owed five dollar bill in his life, seemed to have changed his mind about spending the new twenty burning his jeans that night.

Had Hi Hat not passed out again, and had Odis been able to pay close attention, he might have discovered some things he needed to know.



TOO MANY TWENTIES

Otis sat in the pickup and waited until the long black limousine pulled out of the road that wound back to the Bohannon homestead.

"I wonder what Ogden Hildebrandt is doing back here?" He asked Rooster. Tiny was in the back, since there wasn't room for him in the cab.

"Beats me," Rooster said. "That's the second time this month he's been pokin' around here."

Chickens and guinea hens scattered as Odis braked to a halt under the chinaberry tree.

They were greeted by an older woman in a bonnet and apron with a straw broom in her hand. She had been sweeping the hard clay yard.

"Ma, what was Ogden Hildebrandt doing down here?" Otis asked.

"He said he'd heard you'd had some bad luck pu'pwoodin' and wondered if we would like to sell this place and move to town," she said.

"What'd you tell 'im?" Odis asked.

"Tole 'im luck ain't been that bad, an' hardly any of the chickens and none of the hogs wanted to move to town," she chuckled and spit. "I didn't mention anything about what you boys might want to do."

"What in the world does Ogden Hildebrandt want with this old place?" Rooster asked.

"He said he'd just always wanted him a place in the country away from the traffic and all," she answered. "If y'ask me, I think he's got something up his sleeve, but I'm bound to tell you, I don't know what it is."

"Like as not, he's found out there's oil under the place; or there's a pot of gold buried somewhere around here," Rooster said.

"Ain't been no gold around here since Pa lost his pocket watch," Ma Bohannon said. "He seemed right determined, though, and said to let him know if we changed our minds."

"Did he name a figure?" Otis asked.

"Yep," she answered letting loose a good stream of snuff juice toward a bantam rooster that was scratching too close to her feet. The rooster retreated a few feet, flapped his wings and crowed.

"You better crow, you rascal. I'll get you next time," she said. "Well it was a durn sight more'n the place would be worth to anybody else, but a sight less'n it's worth to me."

Odis thought about it a while and decided she was probably right. Still he wondered what Ogden might be up to. He didn't just go around buying worn out farms without a reason. If Ogden Hildebrandt had a good reason for wanting it, the Bohannons had a better reason for keeping it.

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"Why I want you to do these things doesn't concern you," Ogden Hildebrandt leaned back in his leather upholstered chair and, glancing over the top of his bifocals, regarded the man standing on the other side of his desk.

"I just thought-

"Never mind what you thought. As long as I'm paying you, I'll do the thinking, and you just do as I say." Hildebrandt said. "Is that clear?"

"Yessir, I just thought-

There you go thinking again! . . . Don't," Hildebrandt said sharply. "Just do as I tell you and get some results. And," he added, "if you get caught, I don't know you. and you better not know me. Understand?"

"Yessir."

Hildebrandt, turning his attention to the papers on his

desk, gave the man no further thought, but the man didn't leave.

"Well," he said after several moments.

"I thoug-," the man caught himself, shuffled his feet and looked dejectedly uncomfortable.

Hildebrandt regarded him for a moment, then reached for his wallet. "Here," he said, handing the man two crisp twenties.

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"That's the \$2.75 for the steak and \$1.40 for the beer," Polly said as she wiped the counter in front of Hi Hat and removed the dishes.

"Hi come you won't go no where with me, Polly?" Hiatt asked for the umpteenth time. "Odis ain't a-gonna be around no more after the way you socked 'im," he chortled. "You near 'bout give him a permanent wink."

"I don't think I feel like going anywhere, right now, Hi Hat," Polly said.

"Aw, come on!" Hi Hat urged. "You ain't got nuthin' to lose, an' besides, it'll be the first time you ever went with anybody an' didn't have to pay your own way."

"Otis pays my way!" Polly flared.

"Oh, sure, after you lend him the money what he don't never pay back," Hiatt said. The truth of that statement stung.

"What makes you so sure you could afford to pay my way where I want to go, Mr. Gotrocks?" Polly taunted back.

"I don't know where you think you want to go, Baby, but I can afford to take you anywhere in this county," he said flipping out a small wad of bills. "See there!" he said holding the bills out for her inspection. Polly noted that the wad contained at least one new twenty, and her eyes widened.

"Hi Hat Hiatt, you have never had money like that before in your life!" she exclaimed.

"An' there's plenty more where that came from," He said. "Now, how about it?"

"Nosirree, not me," Polly said. "I'm not going to go anywhere on stolen money!"

"What makes you think I stole it?" Hi Hat inquired.

"Cause I don't know where else you could get that much money, unless you **did** steal it," she said.

"Well, it ain't stole..at least by me," he said. "Now, will you go with me?" he asked.

"That depends," Polly said.

" 'Pends on what?" he asked.

"Depends a lot on how you got that money," Polly said.

"Well, I didn't steal it. I been doin' some extry work for a friend of mine," he said.

"You don't have any friends that would pay you that much to do anything," Polly said.

"That's what you think!" he shouted. "I guess you never heard of Og-" he stopped himself.

"Who?" she said.

"Nevermind. I got 'em," he said, "an' he's got the money, an' that's all you need to know. Now, are you goin' out with me, or not?"

"No," Polly said.

"Well, of all th-," he stormed. "You gonna be sorry for that, some of these days, Miss Snooty! Wait'll yo' sweetie has to go to the po' house. Then you'll come beggin' ole Hi Hat, but he won't know you!" Jamming his hat on his head and a cigar stub in his mouth, he stomped out the door, almost running into Ogden Hildebrandt coming in.

Polly noticed the momentary pause of recognition, which Hildebrandt didn't return.

Polly pondered Hi Hat's new found wealth and wondered if it had anything to do with the run of ill luck Odis had been having lately. She was almost sure he was about to mention Ogden Hildebrandt's name when he was so excited, but she wasn't sure.

Ogden sat at his usual table in the corner by the window

and ordered supper. As he finished and got up to leave, a man whose face was vaguely familiar came in and sat at the table Ogden has just vacated. Polly could have sworn Ogden had had the big manila envelope under his arm when he came in, that the skinny bald headed man with the horn rimmed glasses was stowing in his briefcase.

She gave Ogden change, and thanking him for the 25 Cent tip, placed the crisp new twenty he had paid with, into the register and closed the drawer.

Forty-five minutes later, when the man with the briefcase paid with a new twenty, she called Monroe, and without explaining anything except that she would have called Odis directly if he'd had a phone, asked him to get Otis to call her. Monroe, who thought it probably concerned their current tiff, refrained from asking any prying questions, and promised to get Otis in touch with her in the morning.

* * * * *

Next day Otis stopped by the White Star on his way back from the woodyard. Polly was waiting for him and they sat in a booth at the back.

"You ain't goin't' black my other eye, are you?" Otis asked skittishly.

"No, idiot. You wouldn't have gotten that one, if you'd stopped to listen a minute," she said.

"I got time to listen now, if you got any 'splainin' t' do," Odis said, getting a little bolder.

"Well, you see, what happened-. No! I'm **not** going to explain. I don't have anything to explain," she cried. "You just keep on thinking whatever you want, if you don't have any better sense!"

"Okay, okay! Just don't poke me again, an' I'll get over it," Odis said, deciding to leave well enough alone. "But, if you didn't want to explain, why did you want to see me?"

"I'd nearly forgotten," Polly said, and went on to tell him about all the new twenties she had seen last night, emphasizing

the part about Hi Hat wanting to take her out, and including the part about the man keeping Ogden's manila envelope.

"Had you ever seen the man before?" Otis asked.

"I think he's been in before, but I can't remember when," she said. "I don't think he's from around here, though."

"Ogden's been poking around our place tryin' to buy it, but I don't see what that has to do with all this other; but I bet it does," Odis said.

"What are you going to do?" Polly asked.

"Don't plan to do anything until after me an' Rooster and Tiny get back from the Fair," Otis said.

"Are you all going to the Fair!" Polly squealed. "I wish I could go."

"Maybe next year after we're married," Odis said, kissing her on the cheek and running for the truck.

"Wait!-" Polly called.

"Gotta go," Otis said, and away he went.

"Goin to the State Fair," Polly mused to herself, shaking her head and stroking the spot Odis had kissed. Suddenly she straightened, eyes wide, mouth agape. "Married!" she yelled. "Otis wait!-"

But he was gone.



STATE FAIR

The squatty little car of unknown vintage, resembled a pumpkin both in color and shape. It looked Italian, drove Italian, and, doubtless **was** Italian. To remove any doubt, the horn even beeped with an Italian accent. The car probably predated Mussolini, and, in all likelihood, Da Vinci as well.

"Only been driven by an Eye-talian Grandmother to deliver pizzas to an orphanage," Howling Howard had informed them. (HAPPY HANK had sold out to HOWLING HOWARD).

The fact that the horn sounded tired, while the brakes were hardly worn, lent an element of veracity to Howard's allegation. However, the flapping fenders, cracked windshield and a muffler that was mostly memory, gave evidence of harder usage somewhere along the way.

It is highly doubtful that The Italian manufacturer had Tiny in mind when he designed the car; and it may well have been that he had no desire to make his mother-in-law comfortable when she rode with him. How Tiny ever squeezed into the rear seat, Monroe could not imagine. How he planned to get out, was beyond comprehension, but there he was.

With the boys aboard and Tiny in the rear seat, the rear shocks had about a half inch of travel left, and the front wheels touched the ground with barely enough traction to provide steering. While the rear bumper was dragging, the headlights were aimed several degrees above the horizon; there was little need for the virtually unused brakes, since the car had a tendency to immediately settle in its tracks whenever the driver took his foot off the accelerator. As an added precaution, Tiny wisely sat in the center to keep the craft trimmed.

In the trade, Howling Howard became richer by \$50, but, once again, during the night Old Bet had chewed her halter, found her way home alone, wagon, harness, and all.

"You boys look like Baptist deacons at a WMU Meeting," Monroe greeted them, as the little car came to a halt in a swirling cloud of dust.

There was no doubt the three occupants had bathed, shaved and slicked up for the occasion.

"Ma made us dress up like goin' to church," Odis said.

"She said if we got hurt in an accident, they wouldn't take us to the Charity Ward, if we looked good," Rooster said.

"We even got on clean drawers," Tiny beamed as if that were the ultimate in being next to Godliness.

"I'd appreciate it if you would pick up our cable at the shop. They said they would have it spliced and ready by tomorrow," Otis said. "If nothin' else happens, we'll be ready to start back next week."

"Well, you've had tires slashed, belts cut, axes swiped, cables broken and your gas siphoned off," Monroe said. "Do you reckon anything else will happen before you get back?"

"I hope not, but you never can tell," Odis said. "Tiny is sure his Lepper-coon has been after us, and maybe he's right, but I've got an idea it's somebody else. Thanks for letting us park old Woco in your shed."

"You boys have a good time and don't worry," Monroe said.

"We aim to," Odis said, waving as they drove off.

* * * * *

It was early afternoon and the State Fair grounds was teeming with people by the time the little pumpkin colored car arrived. The regular parking field was a sea of cars, and there was no place to park. Otis finally spotted a place near the side entrance to a large tent. There was a sign reading, "KEEP LANE CLEAR, NO PARKING" in front of the space where Odis

parked, but he squeezed it in with no more than half the car hanging over into the forbidden zone.

Strolling around to the front of the tent to get onto the midway, the boys paused to read the large sign over the entrance to the tent: **"PROFESSOR POLLONI'S PREMIER PERFORMING PACHYDERMS"**.

"What's a patchy-derm?" Tiny asked.

"Dog if I know," Otis answered.

"Sounds like some kind of a rat to me," Rooster put in.

"I don't care nuthin' about seein' no rats," Odis said.

"Me neither," Rooster said. "Tiny, if you want to go watch rats run around a cage, go ahead. We're goin't to go find some 'zibbets. That's what Ma and Polly told us to be sure and see."

"I can watch all the rats I want to see out in the corn crib. I'm goin' with y'all," Tiny said, quickly losing interest in Professor Polloni's "Patchy-derms."

"How do you know how to find a 'zibbet?" Tiny asked.

"There's bound to be a sign up," Odis said. "See there. I told you!" he said, pointing to a large sign over the entrance to a front: **HAREM EXHIBIT**. And just below that, **"ALI BEN ABOUD'S DANCERS FROM THE SERAGLIOS OF THE MYSTERIOUS EAST"**. To either side of the sign were depicted lightly veiled pulchritudinous goddesses in filmy pajamas, titled "Princess Zara" and "Little Baghdad".

"Is that what a 'zibbet looks like?" Tiny asked.

"I guess so," Otis said. He couldn't imagine why Ma and Polly wanted them to see this, but he wasn't going to ask any questions. Buying tickets, they entered the tent.

Thirty minutes later they emerged onto the midway along with a throng of bald headed sweating men and fuzzy-cheeked adolescents. Tiny mopped his brow with a huge limp-wrinkled red bandanna.

"Boy, that was some 'zibbet!" he said. "When that little chubby Baghdad Gal came up there and did the

hootchy-cootch right in my face, I thought I was goin' to fall out of my chair!"

"You did," Rooster said. "An' I like to of broke my back gettin' you off that ole man that was makin' a grab for her when you fell on 'im."

"Well, he didn't have no business makin' a grab for a real Princess like that," Tiny said.

"Ain't no real Princess ever called nobody names like she called him, before," Rooster said. "She didn't say it in no A-rab talk, either. It was plain American like they talk over at Greenville; so he could of understood it, if you hadn't a-been sittin' on his head."

Otis wasn't making any comments on this conversation. He was still trying to puzzle out why Ma and Polly wanted them to go see a hootchy-cootch show. It wasn't like them to encourage such as that. He decided it would be best not to tell them about it, and was about to caution Tiny and Rooster against it, when they passed the Merry-go-round. Tiny rode, and grabbed the brass ring, all right, but the man refused to let him ride again, because he tilted the Merry-go-round all out of kilter. Tiny protested, but put the man down when he agreed to trade the Carousel tickets for tickets on the "Carolina Comet" roller coaster. The boys pronounced it tame compared to riding a runaway Woco downhill backwards without brakes. Rooster much preferred the Comet.

"HURRY! HURRY! HURRY! Step right up, Gentlemen. Win your lady friend a Teddy Bear. Allyuh Got tadew is toss these balls into this bushel basket." So saying, the gaudily clad barker tossed the three balls into the basket, where they stuck as if glued. "Nothin' tuit. You're a sure winner," he said eyeing Odis. "Only one thin dime. The tenth part of a dollar gets you the opportunity to win this valuable cuddly beast for your favorite sweetie. She'll love you for it!" he said enticingly,

doing a good imitation of a Groucho Marx leer. "She'll even grovel at your feet."

"You mean all I've got to do is throw three balls into that basket, an' I win the bear?" Odis said.

"That's all," the man said, tossing three more balls into the basket, where they stayed. Eyeing the balls, the basket and the bear, Otis decided to risk "the tenth part of a dollar".

Seven tenth parts of a dollar later, he had gotten only two balls to stick, and had about decided it wasn't as simple as it appeared, when Tiny walked up chewing on some molasses taffy.

"Give me a hunk of that taffy, Tiny," Odis said.

Taking two pieces from the wax-paper wrapper, Odis kneaded them in his hand until his palm was covered with the sticky molasses. Then, rubbing it off on the balls, he tossed them into the basket one by one, where they stuck . . . solid; one of them to the top rim of the basket, where it hung down.

"Guess I'm a winner, huh," Otis said.

"Wha-" the barker said, gazing at the ball that was defying the law of gravity. "Wait a minute! You can't-"

"Tiny, help him reach my bear off that top shelf," Odis said, motioning to Tiny.

"Sure," Tiny said, walking behind the counter, and, picking the man off the ground with one hand, held him up to the shelf where the four foot baby blue fuzzy Teddy Bear smiled down upon the barker, who was frantically and unsuccessfully trying to free himself. Acknowledging the futility of the struggle, the man fetched the bear off the shelf and, when Tiny deposited him safely on the ground, handed it to Otis.

"Thanks," Otis said, accepting the prize from the disgruntled barker.

"Don't mention it," the man said, brushing himself off. Keeping a leery eye on Tiny, he leaned to Odis, "Listen," he

said. "This stuff is for juveniles. How would you like to get into a man's game?"

"Like what?" Odis said, "Checkers?"

"Like cards," the man answered.

"You mean like 'Go Fish'?" Tiny asked.

"No. I mean like po-" he caught himself. "Oh, Yeah, like 'Go Fish'," he said.

"Hang on a minute," Otis said, motioning Tiny and Rooster to him. "We gotta have a conference."

"How much money we got?" Odis asked.

"I got \$23, but I ain't et yet," Tiny said.

"If you eat, there won't be any money left," Otis said. "Hand it over. You can eat later."

"Can't I keep a dollar? I'll starve," Tiny yelped.

"Okay, keep a dollar, but hush. I don't want them to think we ain't got no money," Odis said. "When we get through, you can buy all the hot dogs they got," he promised. Tiny forked over.

"I got \$30," Rooster said, neglecting to mention the \$5 in his shoe.

"I got \$21 and a little change," Otis said. "That's nearly \$75. That ought to be enough."

Stuffing the money into his shirt, Odis turned to the barker.

"Okay," Otis said, "We'll play, but I ought to warn you I'm the best Rook player in the hills."

"I'm sure you are," the man smiled, "but we'll just have to take our chances."

"Well, let's get started," Odis said, rubbing his hands together.

"Tut, tut. Oh, no. Not here, my boy," the barker said. "We've got a tent out back where the cops won't- er, where we won't be distracted by the minions of the law and noise of the midway. Just a moment, I'll get a colleague to show you the way." He made a motion with his hand, and a nondescript individual seemed to appear out of nowhere.

"Mr. Flowers, will you be so kind as to show these gentlemen to the 'Game Tent'?" he said.

Mr. Flowers, with a tattoo of a dagger protruding from a bleeding heart on his bare forearm, and the hard lump of a blackjack protruding from his hip pocket, didn't appear to be the sort of person often referred to as a "colleague". Somehow the word "MOTHER" emblazoned on the hilt of the dagger failed to soften the impersonal quality of his gaze; but, putting on their best dumb-happy faces, the boys fell in behind and followed him down a back alleyway between the rear of the booths and trucks parked in a row. After walking what seemed to have been at least three city blocks, he led them to a tent pitched in a field behind the row of trucks. Motioning them into the dim quarters, he left without a word, and disappeared as silently as he had appeared.

The tent apparently served as a storage area and dressing room for the show people. Hanging on a rack along one side were various costumes; some of which appeared familiar.

"Hey, looky! There's a Princess suit!" Tiny said, spying the skimpy attire. "I wonder where the Princess is?" he said looking around.

"She must be gone to lunch," Rooster said.

"Looka there!" Otis pointed. "There's a cow suit! I'd even trade this bear for that!" he said.

The costume referred to was yellow with large pink and purple polka dots. The head was adorned with a huge daisy entwined in the horns. A pair of large dreamy blue eyes sported eyelashes fully six inches long which could be batted seductively, together, or one at a time, by pulling strings extending down through the inside. The countenance was frozen permanently in a coy smile.

Odis continued to gawk at the cow suit while the men seated around the large table turned to appraise the new arrivals.

However, not every face gathered under the single light over the table looked up in greeting. Three faces didn't look up at all. They belonged to the figures hunched forward staring at the pot to which they had just contributed, each from meagre pile of jelly beans that served as chips.

"Shuddup and deal," muttered by one and seconded by the other two marked them as losers in what they took to be a game of chance. The greed and hope, mingled with boundless stupidity on these faces must have been what inspired Mr. Barnum to refer to that which is born at the rate of at least one every minute.

One of the figures seemed to be completely inert; neither leaning forward intent on recouping losses, nor leaning back engaging in the banter of the winners. He was out. Out like a light in a drunken haze. He was a turkey that had been long since picked, but having no home to go to, or being afraid to return home empty handed, he just stayed and drank the liquor that was offered and the food that was left over. He was referred to as "John" whenever he was referred to at all, and had been there several days.

Two figures were relaxed, bantering and in no hurry to deal. Sure winners, and obviously part of the traveling show. A tall cadaverous man chewing a toothpick rose and offered his hand, "Setton Ashby," he said.

The other man, who sat with his broad back to the entrance, stood and turned. "Baldwin Head," he said, and Otis found himself shaking hands with none other than Happy Hank, whose painted smile, once he got over the astonishment, suddenly became broader, and genuinely expectant.



A GAME OF CHANCE

Well siree, Turkey Tom, if it ain't Mr. Happy Hank," Otis beamed. "Looky here, boys, it's ole Mr. Hank, hisself!" he said, wringing Hank's hand.

"Well, I'll be dogged-" Hank said, as he recognized the boys.

"This our lucky day!" Odis chortled.

"Yes, and mine, too," Hank responded in an undertone they didn't catch.

"Howdy, Mr. Hank!" Tiny and Rooster joined in the general greeting.

"I see you all know one another," spoke Mr. Ashby.

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Head. "We did some mule tradin' a few years ago."

"It's good to see you boys," he said turning to Odis. The smile, although closely resembling that of a wolf having sighted a fat caribou stuck in the ice, was at least genuine this time.

"You wouldn't care to trade that cow-suit for this bear, would you?" Odis asked, holding up his bear.

"I'm afraid the bear might chew his halter rope," Hank said.

Otis ignored the reference. "I'd sure like to have that cow suit," he said.

"I'm afraid we couldn't part with Gertrude," said Mr. Ashby. "She's part of our livelihood."

"We do an act for the famous Professor Polloni," Head informed them.

"He's the front," nodding toward Head, "and I'm the other end," Ashby explained.

"C'mon. Quit fiddling around. Let's play cards!" one of the losers complained.

"Deal!" said another.

"Patience," Ashby counseled. "Our new friends haven't been acquainted with the rules, yet." Turning to Otis, he said, "Please have a seat, and I will explain the game."

While Odis found a place at the table, Rooster perched on a high stool back in the shadows, and Tiny stood in front of the wardrobe rack, apparently mesmerized by the Princess suit. "I wonder what she wears when she's not wearin' a Princess suit?" Tiny mused.

Odis sat down next to Hank and reached for a handful of jelly beans in the center of the table.

"The name of the game is 'Five Card Stud'," Ashby explained, "And the jelly beans are our poker chips. You have just eaten \$1.25, Mr. Bohannon."

Odis gulped and appeared a little dull-eyed and slack-jawed as Ashby continued to explain the rules to him, but nodded his head as if he comprehended everything when Ashby finished.

"Sounds fun. Let's play," he said.

"Yeah, let's," grumbled one of the losers.

"Shall we begin, gentlemen?" Hank asked smoothly.

"It's about time," said a loser.

Hank dealt the first hand, and Otis won a dollar with a pair of fours and the pair of sixes Hank slipped him off the bottom of the deck.

"Heh, heh. See how easy that was?" Ashby said. "I can see we are going to have to stay on our toes around you, Mr. Bohannon, or you will wipe us out, heh, heh," Ashby said, shuffling the deck.

"Beginner's luck," the fat bald loser said. "That's the way I started out."

Otis continued to win small pots off and on until the last of the losers, the nervous bald fat man, bowed out.

"Cleaned me out," he said sadly. "Cleaned us all out," said his two friends, who were waiting on him, much chastened.

"Here, boys. Have some jelly beans," Hank beamed, "and here's ten dollars for being good sports."

"That don't make up for the \$300 I lost, but at least I won't have to walk home," the fat man said, taking the money.

Before play could resume, Flowers came in with another prospect in tow. This time Flowers spoke.

"Says he's lookin' for a little action," he said. "name's Philip Edwards." Then Flowers once again melted into the background and disappeared.

A slender figure, about 35, with a high forehead, wearing thick horn rimmed glasses, a neat three piece suit, and carrying a briefcase stood in the dimness of the tent and smiled nervously as he waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark.

As soon as his eyes adjusted, he took the seat offered, placing the briefcase on the ground close to his right hand. Reaching into his coat pocket he pulled out a crisp new twenty and bought into the game.

For the next several rounds Odis and Edwards did most of the winning, but none of the pots were big. Then his luck began to change. Not drastically at first, but nevertheless, a change. It seemed that the better the hand he was dealt, the more he would lose.

Once, when the pot had built up fairly well, he found himself with a pair of queens and a pair of tens. Ashby took the pot with three fours. Edwards, who was trying to fill an inside straight, lost a bundle. By then the bank held several new twenties.

During a short break, Otis engaged Mr. Philip Edwards in conversation and learned that he worked for the Highway Department as a highway location engineer. That was an

interesting piece of news, and two plus two began to make four.

Hoping to find out more, Odis asked, "Say, you don't know Mr. Ogden Hildebrandt up in Keowee County, do you?"

Edwards blanched and fumbled before answering, "N-No, I don't actually know him personally," Edwards said. "He does some title work for us up there from time to time, I think, and he is in the Legislature; but I don't ever talk to Legislators," which gave Odis the answer he expected.

What he didn't expect was Hank's reaction at the mention of Ogden Hildebrandt's name. It seems that Hildebrandt caught Hank at a vulnerable time when he was overstocked and underfinanced, and cars, used or otherwise, just weren't moving. A foreclosure gave Hildebrandt all of Hank's stock and the lot, which he sold at a handsome profit to Howling Howard when times got better. It put Hank out of the car business and into a cow suit.

When the game started again, it was Otis' deal and time to make the game honest. Odis shuffled the cards and watched the little designs on the back jump around; a sure indication of a marked deck.

Handing the deck to Tiny, he said, "Will you cut these cards for me, maybe my luck will change?"

"Sure," Tiny said, taking the deck and tearing it in two.

"Lordamighty!" Ashby said. "Cheee!" echoed Hank.

Even John woke up to stare rheumy-eyed at a grinning Tiny and two torn halves of a deck of cards.

"Look what you've done!" Otis said. "Now we got to get a noo deck. Look and see if there ain't one in my coat pocket."

Turning to the astonished players around the table, Odis explained, "We brought a deck with us so we could play 'Go Fish'n.'" They nodded understanding in wide-eyed disbelief, as Tiny handed him the deck.

"Tiny, I bet you might find some extry cards among some of these fellers around here. Try Mr. Hank," Otis suggested.

Before Hank could protest or react, Tiny had him by the heels upside down. "YIEEEEEPS!"

His protest brought Flowers on the run, reaching in his pocket for the blackjack that was no longer there. He was searching in his pockets for it when Rooster, back in the shadows, tapped him on the shoulder. Flowers turned and was rapped sharply on the bridge of the nose with the instrument he was searching for. With his eyes smarting and blood flowing from his nose, Flowers was gently but firmly led out of the tent and sat in the shade of a booth, where his head spun until his nose stopped bleeding.

Back in the tent, an astonishing inventory of cards and devices for marking and concealing cards emerged from Hank's pockets. Aces, Kings, Queens, deuces and Jokers flew everywhere.

"Whoooooeee! Looky here!" Odis said. "There must be another whole deck come out of his sleeves. I bet they just accidentally fell inside his shirt and up his sleeves from playin' so much of the time. You reckon that might have happened to you, Mr. Ashby?"

Tiny sat Hank down head first, and started toward Ashby, "I'll see," he said.

White-eyed, Ashby put up a restraining hand, "Hold it! Hold it! I'll look myself. Stay away from me!"

Cards seemed to blossom from Mr. Ashby's garments. From his sleeves, pockets, collar and even unto the socks on his feet, the cuffs of his trousers and the soles of his shoes came an array of cards of every hue and denomination. Also there was a small derringer and a long keen knife among the souvenirs.

"I'll dee-clare," Odis said, "Just look at all those cards

and stuff. Now, don't you all think you can move a lot easier and breathe better without all that extry weight?"

Rooster moved back to his stool in the shadows.

Hank's head appeared above the table as he was dragging himself to his feet.

"Heh heh. Well, it's funny the way things tend to accumulate on a body when you aren't thinking about it," he said coming to his feet. "Too bad, but I guess the game is over, huh?"

"Naw! Not a-tall," Otis said. "I was just a-fixin' to catch on to it. Don't you think we ought to play some more, Tiny?"

"Sure do," Tiny grinned as Otis and Edwards moved back to the table. Hank and Ashby looked at each other for a moment, then back at Tiny, before opting for discretion other than destruction.

Odis picked up the new deck and riffled it a time or two before dealing. "I heard they was a game called 'Five Card Draw'. What say we take a stab at it with deuces wild? An' I Don't want to see anymore twitchin', itchin', scratchin', winkin', kickin', pointin', or noddin'."

Two hours and twenty-seven minutes later, Otis had all the new twenties; Edwards was gone' Ashby was out, and even John had stirred himself awake and disappeared. There was \$847 in the pot. Once again Odis held two pairs; eights and jacks. Hank was playing a pat hand, so far, but Otis thought he was bluffing. Odis was dealer; deuces were wild. Hank raised five. Otis glanced at Rooster in the shadows. Rooster scratched his eye and pulled at his nose a time or two, not looking at Odis.

"I'll see it and bump you five," Otis said.

"Can't go no more. I'm out of money," Hank said. "But, look, it ain't sportin' to buy the pot when you're ahead. You want that cow suit. It'll stand for your raise."

Odis felt queasy. Maybe Hank wasn't bluffing, but he was right about buying the pot. Otis couldn't do that. It just

wasn't sporting. Again he glanced at Rooster, who was scratching his eye, not looking at Odis or Hank, either, for that matter.

"Okay," Odis said. "Cards?"

Hank rapped the table.

"Oh Lord! Pat hand. He ain't bluffin'," Otis thought.

"Dealer takes one," he dropped a cowboy and drew a card. It was a deuce.

"Read 'em and weep time," Odis said.

Hank smiled, spread his cards. "Three ladies," he said, and reached for the pot.

"Them ladies can't come in a crowded cabin," Otis said, spreading his hand and watching Hank's face fall.

For all his shenanigans, Hank was not without a certain style. For one thing, he knew when he was beaten. He sat for a few moments in crumpled defeat while Odis gathered up his winnings; then, shaking his head and heaving a huge sigh, he said, "Mister, you done cleaned our plow good, but you ain't took us no worse than we were aimin' to take you. No hard feelin's," he offered his hand, "but do you mind tellin' me where did you learn to play poker like that?"

"Well, when I was just a little bitty shaver, my old Pappy used to make me stay inside and play poker with him. Took me nearly three years to learn to beat him, so I could go outside and do something else. He knew every crooked trick they wuz, an' he wasn't a bit bashful about usin' 'em. You fellers are pikers compared to my old Pappy."

"Thank God, I never had to play poker with him," Hank said.

"A lot of people wisht they hadn't," Otis said, "cludin' me."

Putting a few bills in his pocket, Odis stuffed the rest into Gertrude's horns. Then, folding the costume carefully into a large seamless sack, he joined Tiny and Rooster heading toward the midway.

"What'd you scratch your eye for on that last hand?" Otis asked Rooster. "That warn't no signal for three queens!"

"What do you mean 'signal'? I didn't give no 'signal'. I couldn't see his cards," Rooster protested.

"Then why did you scratch your eye and pull your nose! That is plain our signal for a pair of sixes, an' I thought I clean had 'im beat," Odis said.

"What do you mean, 'why did I scratch?" I **itched!** That's why I scratched!" Rooster shouted.

"If that deuce hadn't fell on the last hand, he had me beat five ways to Sunday!"

"Next time, why don't you just shoot dice and leave me out of it," Rooster suggested.

As they were stepping out of the alley between the booths onto the midway, there came a shout from behind.

"Wait!-" It was Hank and Ashby, running to catch them.

"Uh oh, trouble," Rooster said, expecting the worst.

Huffing and puffing as they came up to the boys, Ashby said, "listen, we need a favor."

"I knew it," Rooster muttered.

"What's the problem?" Otis asked.

"I'm afraid we- that is, Head and I are in a bit of a pickle-,"

"Count me out," Rooster said, walking away.

"No, wait!" Ashby said, "We're really in a jam, and you all can help us out."

"That depends on the problem," Odis said.

"The problem is," Hank put in, "that Polloni has us over a barrel in a tight contract to do our bovine act before the main show, and will have our hides if we don't show up."

"You ain't gittin' Gerty back!" Otis said.

"No, no," Ashby said, "You won her fair and square. She's yours."

"What we were hoping was that your brothers might put on the costume and do the act in our stead," Hank explained. "Polloni would never know the difference, and-"

"I knew it! Goodby!" Rooster headed down the midway, but Tiny grabbed him before he could get far.

"-In the meantime, Ashby and I can either put a new act together, or get out of town," Hank finished. "**Please**," he added.

"We don't know nuthin' about no cow acts!" Rooster protested.

"You don't **have** to know anything," Ashby said. "All you have to do is show up at the right time, cavort around the ring a little, make eyes at the pretty girls, an', when the ringmaster announces the show, you do a couple of bows and leave."

"Just be careful not to go out the rear exit, or you may be trampled by one of Polloni's Pachyderms," Hank added.

"I ain't never heard of nobody being trampled by no rat," Tiny whispered to Rooster.

"The whole thing smells like a rat to me," Rooster muttered.

"Can you get me a ticket to the show?" Odis asked.

"No problem," Ashby said, holding out a ducat.

"Okay, we'll do it," Odis said, accepting the proffered ticket in spite of the frantic "**NO**" votes being cast by the waving arms of Tiny and Rooster.

"Ahem, er uh, one other little thing, if you don't mind," Ashby said.

"Since you wiped us out completely," Hank added. "We thought maybe you could see your way clear for a little loan until things get better."

"How much?" Odis asked.

"Twenty five dollars?" Hank said.

"Fifteen," Odis replied.

"We'll take it, and bless you," Ashby said, before Hank could dicker any further.

"I don't like this a-tall," Rooster said. "There's got to be more to it than he tol' us."

There was.



THE PACHYDERM PARADE

At four-thirty sharp, a very peculiar looking animal poked its head through the curtains near the rear entrance to Professor Polloni's Performing Pachyderm's tent. It blinked its eyes coyly, and tentatively entered the ring to the titters and twitters of the mostly juvenile crowd.

Stepping into full view, the front end halted, while the rear apparently didn't get the message. This brought a sudden round of laughter, which seemed to have confused the giddy yellow bovine with pink and purple polka dots, the huge daisy entwined in her horns, and the enormous eyes.

"Ouch! Watch where you're goin'," Rooster hissed.

"I can't see nuthin' but your behind. Let me know when you're gonna stop," Tiny said.

"All right, I'll give you hand signals," Rooster held his hand behind him. "One finger is stop; two is go."

"Okay, that's better. Let's go," Tiny said, and they started off, rear end out of step, so that he had to skip to catch up. That brought another burst of laughter, and Tiny was beginning to like it, and even Rooster's sagging confidence was bolstered.

"You see Otis out there anywhere?" Tiny asked.

"Can't see anything much through this critter's mouth," Rooster said.

"Let's go over and make eyes at the crowd, like they said. Maybe we'll see him then," Tiny said.

"Okay, here we go," Rooster said, and the crowd roared when Tiny was a little late changing directions, and went the wrong way when he did.

The polka-dotted cow stopped at the edge of the crowd

and scanned back and forth with head nodding and eyes blinking.

"See 'im?" Tiny asked.

"No. I'm just winkin' and blinkin' at the kids," Rooster said. Squeals and laughter indicated the kids were excited over the cow. Tiny felt warm. It made him feel good to make kids laugh.

"**YIEEEPS!**" Rooster leaped backward, knocking Tiny off his feet and landing in his lap. It seems that one little girl, aged five, decided that Gertrude was thirsty and shared her Super Cola, pouring the entire contents down Gertrude's throat into Rooster's face.

"Hey! Get off!" but Rooster couldn't budge, since Tiny was sitting on his foot.

"Get off my foot!"

"I can't 'til you get off my belly!"

Squeals from the audience indicated the viewers were enjoying it immensely, but Tiny and Rooster were too engrossed in regaining their feet to pay any attention to the audience.

Rooster finally succeeded in getting his foot out from under Tiny, and had regained his feet. Tiny, on the other hand, was having a tougher time.

"Get up, Tiny!" Rooster begged. He wanted nothing more than to get out of there and tell Odis, Polloni, Hank and Setton Ashby what they could do with their cow act, suit and all.

"I can't!" Tiny called from below, "Something's holding me down!"

What the boys didn't know, and the audience did, was that Rooster was standing on that part of Gertrude's anatomy that produced the dairy products. The crowd was howling.

That is where they were when the miniature red fire engine with flashing red lights and siren wailing rushed into the arena, making one full circuit and skidding to a halt by the

struggling cow. It disgorged about two dozen midget firemen, who went to work immediately.

Two of them ran up and started fanning Gertrude with huge towels while a couple of others swept her off with brooms. Another set made a lever out of a plank and a barrel, and were trying to pry Gertrude's huge rear off the ground. They were making pretty good progress, when several others ran up with the fire hose.

A mighty heave brought Tiny to his feet and dumped him over on top of Rooster just as a stream of water shot from the hose, missing Gertrude, but flattening six midgets.

It was too much. Both ends of Gertrude passed out cold. With the assistance of at least twenty of what Tiny and Rooster would have sworn were "Lepper-coons", Gertrude was loaded onto the fire engine, and, with three midgets astride and all four feet in the air, was borne out of the arena; red lights flashing and sirens wailing. The crowd was gasping for more, but there wasn't any more as far as Tiny and Rooster were concerned. Their show-biz career was over.

Otis headed for the dressing tent as the fire engine shot out of the arena. He wanted to be there waiting with a first aid kit full of hamburgers before Tiny and Rooster decided to gang up on him. He was gone before the band struck up the ponderous beat of "Baby Elephant Walk", and Professor Polloni's Premier Performing Pachyderms entered the tent. Tiny would have been astonished at the size of those "rats".

* * * * *

When Tiny came to, the first thing he saw was several of the little guys standing around him with anxious looks on their faces. Tiny re-entered the real world, but all he wanted to talk about was "the little men". He was totally enchanted, and never again was anyone ever going to convince him that Leprechauns were a figment of his imagination. They were real, and he had seen them, and talked to them, and that was that.

Rooster recovered a little more rapidly, and they all felt better after a hamburger, or two. Tiny polished off thirteen, but he was a growing boy and hadn't eaten since breakfast.

It had been a long day and was getting on toward sundown by the time they made their way back to the car. As they approached, they noticed a rather large crowd gathered around the place they had left the little pumpkin shaped vehicle. All three stopped, wondering what all the excitement was about.

Quite a large group of people were standing around, scratching heads, some chuckling, some pointing, some simply gaping.

The little car had been squashed! The top was caved in, the windshield popped out, headlights tilted upward, doors were sprung outward, and there was a distinct sag in the middle.

There was a man wearing an official looking uniform cap who seemed to be in charge. Odis went up to him to find out what had happened.

"What in tarnation happened!" Odis asked.

"This is your car, Mister?" the guard asked.

"Well, it was," Otis replied.

"Shouldn't of left it so close to the lane."

"I got it off as far as I could. There was room for people to get by," Odis said.

"People, maybe, but not pachyderms," the guard said.

"There ought to of been room for pachy-derms, too," Otis said. "I mean after all, how much room do you need for a pachy-derm?"

"Sometimes they need lots of room," the guard said.

"Maybe so," Odis said, "but what does elbow room for a pachy-derm have to do with my car bein' caved in!"

"It got sat on by one," the guard said.

"Sat on by a pachy-derm?" Otis said. "It looks more like it was run into by a ran-oysterpus!"

"Naw, it weren't no rhinoceros; it were a pachy-derm, all right," the guard answered. "I seen 'er when she done it."

"You seen it-?" Odis asked, astonished.

"Yep. She come down the walk with the rest of 'em all in a line. Jennie's 'er name. She's always the last one in the line. But when she spotted this little punkin colored car, she jus' come over and sat on it."

"Sat on my car! What she doin' sittin' on my car?" Otis asked.

" 'Cause she's been trained to sit on a big stool, and this squatty lil' car looked 'zactly like a big stool to her," the guard answered. "Does look just like 'er stool," he said appraisingly.

"You mean a pachy-derm **sat** on my car and that's what sprung th' doors?" Odis said.

"Yep. That's right. Popped out the windshield and all the windows, too," he said.

"Godamighty! How could a pachy-derm do all a that!" Odis exclaimed.

"Wouldn't be no problem. They get pretty big," the guard said.

"Dang! They don't get **that** big, do they?" Otis asked.

"Oh, yes. They get to weighin' quite a bit," the man said.

"How big **do** they get?" Odis asked.

"Oh, I'd say several tons, prob'ly," the guard answered, scratching his chin. No one had ever asked him to estimate the weight of a pachy-derm before, and he wasn't too sure of the gross tonnage.

"A rat that weighs ten tons!" Otis said. "My Lord! Wait 'til Polly hears about that. She ain't goin' to believe it!"

"A rat! What you talkin' 'bout a rat! It weren't no rat a-tall! It were a' nelly-fant!" the guard said.

"A nelly-fant!" Odis said.

"Yes. A nelly-fant!"

"I thought you said it was a pachy-derm," Otis said.

"It **was** a pachyderm!" the man exclaimed.

"What's pachy-derms got to do with elly-fants?" Odis asked.

"Pachy-derms **is** elly-fants, man!"

"You mean they ain't rats?" he said.

"Naw! They ain't rats. In fac' they ain't nuthin' a pachy-derm is more scared of than a mouse!"

"You mean my car's been sat on by a nelly-fant" Otis asked, facts beginning to dawn.

"You're gittin' it," the guard said.

"Then why didn't you say so 'stead of beatin' around the bush," Odis said.

"I **been** tryin' to tell you. You just ain't been listenin'. All you wanted to talk about was rats!" the guard replied indignantly. "An' Perfessor P'loni tol' me to give you this, 'cause his **pachy-derm** caved in yer roof. Also, he ain't got no rats."

There was twenty-five dollars in the envelope, which was half of what the car cost originally, not counting Old Bet, and the harness and the wagon, since Old Bet brought them back with her.

"He woulda give you fifty, but your car was half out in the lane. He jus' didn't want no trouble," the guard said.

"My Lord! Polly would believe a ten ton rat as easy as she's gonna believe a elephant sat on the car," Odis said.

Tiny did a quick body job, pulling the roof back up so they could all get in. The doors didn't shut too well, and all the windows, including the windshield, had been shattered. The headlights were cocked up at a steep angle. Possums in tall trees might complain, but drivers of on-coming cars wouldn't be blinded.

To keep the wind out of his eyes, Otis donned Gertrude's head. It worked like a charm. Tiny, sitting in the front seat, because the back, with its mis-shapen roof, would no longer hold him, shielded Rooster from the wind. Rooster

promptly wrapped up in the front part of Gertrude minus the head, and went to sleep. To protect against the nip of the fall air, Tiny wore Gertrude's rear half. There wasn't much he could do with the four dairy dispenser faucets that ended up as part of his lap, but winding the tail around his neck made a handy scarf and kept it out of his way.

They were nearly to Ninety-six when the Sheriff's Deputy pulled them over.



THE PURPLE COW GANG

Deputy Corporal Lance Wagener, in his shiny motorcycle helmet, highly polished black motorcycle boots, and dazzling black Harley-Davidson "Hog" Fancied himself the equal of any evil-doers that dared enter his bailiwick in and around the environs of the small village of Ninety-six. (It was so named, because in Colonial Times it was ninety-six miles from the pride of the British Crown in Upper Carolina, Fort Prince George; which, in turn, was named after a Prince named George.)

As proof that he ran a tight ship, there was absolutely no organized crime in Ninety-six. None. There was very little un-organized crime, either; although a cow or chicken did go missing from time to time, and a hub cap might disappear without explanation. Otherwise, Ninety-six was crime-free, if you didn't count a little bootlegging, and Deputy Corporal Wagener intended to keep it that way.

Having had things his way, undisturbed, for several years, there was nothing to prepare him for the shock he was about to receive. There was hardly any precedent for it and no mention whatever in the manuals as to how to handle the situation he was about to face.

Placing a well practiced foot on the running board of the little car, he flicked the switch on his five celled flashlight, asked a routine question, "May I see your driver's license-" then, "**LORDAMIGHTY!**", as the bright beam shone full in the face of a yellow purple polka dotted cow with a daisy in her horns.

He fell back several feet and groped for the .357 Magnum in the leather holster on his hip. Good reaction, so far.

"What seems to be the problem, officer?" the cow asked.

"DON'T MOVE!" Wagener shouted. "I got you covered!" He fumbled, however, and the heavy gun slipped from his fingers. There was a splash as it dropped into the waters of the deep ditch along the side of the highway.

"Oh shht!" he said under his breath.

"What in thunder is goin' on?" the cow wanted to know.

"Just you stay where you are, I told you!" Wagener wheeled and pointed the flashlight at the cow, which was trying unsuccessfully to get the door open.

This time, when the Corporal stepped back, he managed to trip over the shiny black Harley and send it tumbling over twice down the banks of the ditch before it disappeared part way into the water. At least he had held on to the flashlight, and he still had handcuffs and mace. If the cow didn't know he had dropped his gun, he was still in charge of the situation.

"All right, Smart Cow, I want you outta there, spreadeagled and hands on the hood!" he ordered, directing the beam fully into the cow's eyes.

"I can't get the door open," Otis said. "You gonna have to give me a minute, or let Tiny come around and open it."

Calculating that anybody named "Tiny" couldn't pose much of a threat he assented. Expecting at most a diminutive girl, he was hardly prepared for the three hundred plus pound beef and muscle yellow cow with purple polka dots that crawled out.

"Ye Gods! Another one!" he shouted. "What's them things?" he said as the beam struck the dairy faucets that were in Tiny's lap when he was sitting.

"Oh, that-s" Tiny said, looking down,

"Nevermind!-" Lance shouted. "Get over here and get this door open! Quick!"

"Yessir!" Tiny said, and pulled the door off the hinges. Odis stepped out with his hands in the air.

"Would you like Tiny to-

"I don't want 'Tiny' to do anything! You just both get spread-eagled right now! No monkey business, or I'll shoot! You hear me!"

"Shoot what? You ain't got no gun, unless you tote an extry," Odis said.

"Yes I do! An' I'll shoot if you move a peg!" The Corporal stuck to his guns, even if it was in the side ditch. He had no choice but to run a bluff.

"Okay, if you say so," Otis said, assuming the position to be searched.

Tiny giggled when he was being searched.

"Shuddup!" Lance ordered.

"I can't. It tickles," Tiny said.

"All right. You ain't got nuthin' on you, anyway."

Corporal Wagener was beginning to realize he was in a sort of a pickle. He had on his hands two possible desperados. His gun was lost under three feet of black muddy water, and his beautiful sleek motorcycle with his two-way radio communications was immersed in the same pool. He had to do something quick.

"C'mere, Mr. Smart Cow," he said motioning to Odis. "Take that stupid cow's head off so I can see you."

"I can't. It's stuck," Otis said.

"Oh, it is, is it? We'll see." The Corporal gave it a jerk, expecting it to come right off. It didn't. Odis had jammed it so far down on his head to keep it from blowing away, it was gathered up under his chin and wouldn't come off.

"Dang! It **is** stuck," Wagener agreed. "All right, I'll just handcuff you to this tree 'til I can get my motorcycle out of the ditch. Then we'll get this mess straightened out."

"What mess? There weren't no mess 'til you stopped me," Odis pointed out. "You still haven't tol' me why you pulled us over, anyway."

"I pulled you over for leaving the scene of an accident!" the Corporal shouted.

"What accident! We ain't left no accident!" Otis shouted back.

"Oh yeah! Look at that car! You tell me that ain't no accident!" the Corporal shouted back. One had to admit he had a pretty good point.

"That warn't no accident. A pachy-derm sat on it," Odis pointed out.

"A Patchy what! You tryin' to be funny, Mr. Smart Cow? You better watch your mouth!" Lance shouted. "You don't know who you're foolin' with. You'll end up on the rock pile 'til the cows-" deciding the reference would be inappropriate under present circumstances, he dropped it.

"Why don't you get on your radio an' find out?" Otis asked.

" 'Cause my radio is down there in the ditch on my bike!" the Corporal said.

"Why don't you let Tiny go down there and get it out, then?" Odis said.

"You think he would-"

"Tiny, go down there and get the officer's bike outta the ditch," Odis suggested.

"Sure," Tiny said. "He'll have to go with me and hold my tail, though. It gets in the way."

"Hold your what-" Wagener said.

"Go on with him and get your bike," Otis said, "Otherwise we'll be here all night."

There was some grunting and groaning, slipping and sliding, heaving and shoving; but in a little bit Tiny emerged from the ditch with the dripping Harley held by the handle bar. Wagener followed holding Tiny's tail. "Didn't even get wet," he grinned.

"Hang on a minute," Tiny said, sliding back down into the ditch, dragging Wagener with him, who was still hanging onto the tail.

A few seconds later he re-emerged holding the dripping pistol between thumb and fore-finger. "I thought I felt it with my foot, when I was gettin' the bike cut," Tiny said, handing the soggy weapon to the Corporal.

Re-armed, Corporal Wagener regained some of his self confidence. Returning to his formerly all-business-humorless state, Wagener again asserted control, although he wasn't as certain as before, that he **was** in control. At least he had his bike, gun and radio back . . . if it would work.

"This is Unit four-oh-two to Base. Talk to me, Charlie."

There was a crackling and a buzz, then a voice came back.

"That you, Lance? Where the Hell've you been? We been callin' you over an hour . . . over" (crackle, crackle spittzz)

"I'm out here on the highway tendin' to business. Where you think I been . . . over," Lance answered.

(crackle, crackle, spitzz) "I hear water. Sounds like you in a well. You takin' a shower somewhere? Hold on. The Sheriff's wantin' to talk to you . . . over" (crackle, spzttz)

"I want to talk to him, too, an' I ain't takin' no shower . . . over" (crackle, spittzz, crackle)

A heavier voice full of authority came on. "This is the Sheriff speakin'. Wagener, did you hang a ticket on that red Buick parked in front of Bluff's Hardware this afternoon?" (No "over". No crackle. No spittzz. That was the **Sheriff** speaking.)

"Uh, Yessir. It was parked next to the fire hydr-" (crackle, CRACKLE, **SPITTTZZTT!**) The Sheriff was speaking again.

"Well, next time you hang a ticket on a red Buick you make sure it **ain't** the one my wife's drivin'. GOT THAT!"

"Er, Yessir! Ten-four on the tickets. Got that. No more tickets on red Buicks. Yessir. I mean Nossir. I mean no more Tickets. Yessir. I mean Roger, sir and over."

They didn't call Sheriff Elwood B. Plunkett "Buster" for nothing. He had a way of getting his point across and making it stick.

"All right. Now where you been the last hour. Out at Raymond's Truck stop makin' cow eyes at Mary Lou Foster?"

"Cow eyes? Oh, Yeah, cow eyes. Nossir. Not at Mary Lou, I mean. I got a couple here. Cows . . . I mean I've got a couple of cows cornered out here that look like desperados, and I need some back-up . . . over"

"What kind of cows? Describe 'em."

"Ten-four. Well, sir, they left the scene of an accident, an' . . ."

"Where was the accident? We ain't had no accident reports involvin' no cows."

"They said a Patchy-derm sat on their car. Coulda-"

"A Patchy What! Wagener have you been drinkin'?"

"Nossir! Not a drop, sir! Ten-four on that Patchy-derm, sir. That's DERM. D-E-R-M . . . over, sir"

"I know how to spell "derm", an', in case you don't know it a Pachyderm is a elephant. That's E-L-E-P-H-A-N-T, and I happen to **know** there ain't none of them in the whole dang County!"

"Yessir! Roger on that Pachyderm, sir. None in the county. Ten-four on that.

"Now what about them cows what might be 'desperados'. What do they look like, or can you tell the difference between a cow and a desperado?"

"Well, you see, one of 'em's got on a cow's head with a daisy in the horns; an' the other one weighs about three hundred pounds, has purple polkadots, and picked up my Harley out of the ditch with one hand."

CRACKLE. CRACKLE. SPITZ.TTTZZITTT!

"Wagener! You HAVE BEEN DRINKIN'! Get Y'R BUTT IN HERE IN FIVE MINUTES, OR I'M SENDIN' A POSSE AFTER YOU WITH ORDERS TO SHOOT TO KILL! GOT THAT!"

"Yessir. Ten-four on that 'shoot to kill,' sir. Uh, Roger on the Posse. I'm comin' in, sir. Don't shoot . . . er, over."

"What in Sam Hill's goin' on out there? Can't you all keep it quite so I can sleep," Rooster said, sticking his purple polkadotted cow-suit wrapped head out the window.

"Oh my God, another one!" about to be Ex-Deputy Corporal Lance Wagener shouted. "You heard him! I got five minutes, but you ain't got but THREE to get outta this County before I start shootin', if the water ain't ruined my bullets!"

Tiny freed Otis by pulling up the tree he was handcuffed to, and they made it out of the County on Schedule.

So was born the legend of the Purple Cow Gang; never again mentioned by Ex-deputy Corporal Lance Wagener, fry cook at Raymond's Hi-Way Truck Stop.



ADDING UP THE SCORE

"Where in the world did you get so many of them?" Polly asked.

"Nevermind that, right now. Look at the serial numbers," Otis said.

"They're all in a row," Polly said.

"That's right," Otis said. "Now look at the numbers we copied off the Twenty you got from Hildebrandt and the one you got from Hi Hat."

"They're all pretty close," Polly said.

"That's right," Otis said. "That makes it pretty sure Hi Hat got his from Hildebrandt."

"It sure wasn't the other way around," Polly agreed.

"Well, these others came from that skinny bald-headed engineer feller you saw come in here when Hildebrandt was leaving."

"How did you find him?" Polly asked.

Otis told her all about how the man showed up at Hank's crooked poker party, and how he had guessed who he was from the twenties and Polly's description.

"'Course I couldn't prove anything, but I'm not trying to," Otis said. "It just shows some kind of link between Hildebrandt, Hi Hat and the engineer, and I want to know what Hildebrandt is up to, and why he's been payin' Hi Hat to mess up our equipment."

"Well, what do you think?" Polly asked.

"First of all, it don't make no sense to of been payin' Hi Hat to do what he would of been glad to of done out of just plain cussedness, 'cept that Hildebrandt had a good reason to be sure it got done so he paid him to do it."

"Why would Hildebrandt want to hurt you?" Polly asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"Oh, he's got a reason, all right; a good one," Otis said. "He wants to buy our place, an' he figures Ma'll be more likely to sell if we have a run of bad luck and can't afford to eat."

"Odis, that's cruel!" Polly said. "Do you think he would really do that?"

"I think he'd pull most anything he thought he could get away with, if it would help him make a dollar," Otis said.

"But that is pretty sneaky and drastic," she said.

"Not when you consider he knows there's two new highways goin' to meet smack in the middle of our place," he said.

"What!" she exclaimed, "How do you know that!"

"Well, that young engineer feller what I won all those new twenties off'n has somethin' to do with locatin' new highways, an' that's what the map in his briefcase showed," Otis said. "The Highway Department doesn't show this to folks until they are a lot farther along than they are now. This kind of information is worth something, and he probably sold it to Hildebrandt, an' got paid in these twenties."

"Why did he show you those maps?" Polly asked.

"Well, he didn't exactly **know** he was doin' it when he did it."

"What do you mean?" Polly asked suspiciously.

"Well, when I seen him peelin' out those twenties, I got to thinkin' he sure fits the description of that guy you were wondering about. "Nen when I saw he was bein' awful careful with his briefcase, I thought we'd better find out what was in it."

"How did you manage that? I know he didn't just open it up and show you," Polly said.

"Well, there was a little excitement one time that sort of took his mind off his briefcase for a few minutes. Rooster took a look at it then an' put it back 'thout anybody knowin'."

"Otis Bohannon, you probably ought to be shot," Polly said. "I didn't know you had it in you, and I'm not sure I will ever entirely trust you again."

"Now, don't blame me," Odis said. "Tiny and Rooster had as much to do with it as I did."

"Maybe so, but I know who put them up to it," Polly said.

"Just tryin' to find out what was goin' on," Otis said.

"Now that you know, what are you going to do about it?" Polly asked.

"Well, Hildebrandt doesn't know I'm on to him; that's one thing. He's goin' to keep tryin' to get Ma to sell 'til he finds out she won't. 'Nen he'll try somethin' else."

"What do you think he'll try?" Polly asked.

"Money means enough to him that he will try most anything," Odis said. "I know he's goin' to keep payin' Hi Hat to bust up our equipment. I think I'll just let him keep payin' 'im, and we'll keep our eyes open an' try to hold the damage down. Long as he don't hurt us too bad, we can stand it. Ol' Hi Hat needs the money, an' he's enjoyin' it, too."

"What about Hildebrandt?" Polly asked. "What are you going to do about him?"

"Not much we can do right now, 'cept sit and wait," Otis said. "Ain't no law against makin' offers, an' so far, that's all he's done besides agg ole Hi Hat into doin' what he wanted to, anyway; an' we can't prove that."

"You think he might just give up?" Polly asked.

"No. He ain't the givin' up kind," Odis said. "He'll keep tryin' 'til he comes up with somethin' he is pretty sure will work."

"You think he will hang himself, if you give him enough rope?" Polly asked.

"I guess you might say that," Odis said. "He'll gather up a lot of rope, long as he doesn't know we're on to him."

"Then where does that leave us, now?" Polly asked.

"I think the best way to smoke 'im out is to lay low until he shows his hand. He knows word of this highway is going to leak out pretty soon, and he's gonna start gettin' antsy. In fact, I think he already is. He wants to buy up as much land along the right-of-way as he can, an' he's got to get it before folks get wise and prices start goin' up. I'm thinkin' he's goin' to get tired of foolin' around an' make his main move pretty soon. That's when we'll hang him."

"If he doesn't hang you first," Polly said.

* * * *

"She's gettin' ripe and ready to burn, Mr. Pat," Littlejohn said.

They were standing out by the barn looking at the kudzu thicket, which was showing the effects of the long summer's campaign. The herbicide had nipped it back all around the perimeter as far as the bluff facing the creek. The cows and goats had done their work on it, too. No doubt it was ravaged and battle-scarred, but it was still a formidable thicket. A controlled burn was to ring out the campaign for this year.

Think we can get at it soon as it frosts?" Monroe said.

"I think so. Just give it a couple of days to dry out real good. It'll be ready and we'll touch 'er off," Littlejohn replied.

"I'll be ready, too," muttered the sinister figure lurking in the brush nearby. "You might get a few surprises you aren't expecting," he said. "Come on, Sam." He and the big black Labrador started back for their cave.

* * * *

"Look," Hi Hat said, "I done slashed his tires, poured acid on his loader cable, poked holes in his hydraulic lines, sugared his gas an' put oil in his battery. He ain't delivered a stick of wood in two weeks!"

"All right, all right. I'm not complaining. You did what I told you, and I paid you for it," Hildebrandt said. "What's your problem?"

"He parks his truck down there next to that kudzu thicket," Hiatt said.

"So what's wrong with that?" Hildebrandt asked.

"It gives me the creeps. That's what," Hiatt said.

"A kudzu thicket! Get out of here!"

"No, sir. I'm serious. Every time I go sneakin' around there after dark, I feel like somethin's watchin' from that thicket, an' it's gonna jump out and grab me," Hiatt said.

"Look, if you're trying to hit me for more money, forget it. I've paid you enough, and I can get along without you."

"No, that's not it," Hi Hat protested, "It's just that Tiny Bohannon thinks he's seen somethin' in that thicket, an' I'm beginnin' to believe him."

"Don't come around me with fairy tales! I don't want to hear it! If you want to keep collecting, you do what I tell you. Got that?"

"Yessir," Hiatt said, shuffling his feet.

"Okay. Here's your money. You just keep doing what you're paid to do, and forget little men in kudzu thickets. Understand?"

"Yessir," Hi Hat said.

* * * * *

"Otis, we have to make some plans," Polly said.

Polly was sitting on a big rock down by the springhouse, watching Odis work on the well pump.

"What kind of plans?" Odis asked, but he was afraid he already knew what was coming. He was right.

"You said something about getting married," Polly said. "Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I remember, all right," Otis said, "I just didn't know for sure if you did."

"Well, I do, and you are going to help me make some plans." Polly said.

"I don't know what kind of plannin' I got to do, besides showin' up at the right time," Odis said.

"You mean you're going to leave all the planning up to me?" Polly said.

"If you and your Ma and my Ma can't do it, it can't be done," Otis said.

"That's a deal!" Polly said. "We'll make the plans, and you just show up."

She had taken him up so fast, it made him suspicious he might not have made too good a bargain. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Well, I might have to ask you some questions sometimes," she said.

"Like what?" he said.

"Like, what's your hat size?" Polly said.

"Hat size! What's hats got to do with weddin's?" he said.

"You'll find out soon enough, and sooner than that, if you'd decided to help with the plans," she answered.

"No thank ye. I think I'd just as soon be surprised as to know about it and dread it 'til it happened," he said.

"Don't say you weren't offered," she said.

"By the way, just when is this thing supposed to happen?" he asked.

"So you'll have a chance to disappear or back out?" Polly said. "Nothing doing," she teased.

"No way," Otis said, "I got too much invested to start backin' out, but I've got to know when to show up, if that's the only thing I've got to do with it."

"You just stay ready, and I'll let you know," Polly said.

"Aw, Polly, come one. Give me a hint, anyway," Odis said.

"All right. How about Christmas?"

"Okay. I've got nothing else to do Christmas."

"It's a date?"

"It's a date."

"Now then. What's your shoe size?" Polly asked.

* * * * *

The small figure and the large dog moved silently about their business in the tunnels through the thickly matted vines. They knew their way in the dark, but were aided some by the bright moonlight that filtered through.

Every so often the stooped form would stop, take a small package out of the large sack he was carrying, and plant it in the vines beside the passageway.

The large sack was empty when the big dog made a low rumbling growl.

"Hush, Sam. We'll check on it," the grizzled man whispered.

The growl subsided.

Peering through an opening in the leaves, silhouetted against the soft light of the full moon, they discerned a figure moving stealthily toward the parked truck. He paused for a moment to remove the tall hat and place it on a fence post. Then he disappeared into the dark shadows near the truck. The heavy night dew made moving silently easy.

There was a long pause while the man was obviously getting ready to do something to the truck. Then a moment later came an "UNFH", and the sound of a body falling heavily into the brush. A few seconds more, and there was the sound of stirring as the figure sat up and struggled to his feet.

"I knew this place was hainted," he muttered. Retrieving his hat and jamming it on his head, he disappeared as fast as he could go. Hildebrandt would have a hard time getting him to go back.

Someone had rerouted the electric fence around the goat enclosure and wired it to the truck. Anyone standing on the damp earth and touching Old Woco would get quite a charge out of it. Someone watching a vandal get his come-uppance might get a pretty good charge out of it, too.

The belly laugh from the kudzu thicket wasn't just Hiatt's imagination.

Next morning the fence was back where it belonged.



HILDEBRANDT FORECLOSES

"Madame, surely you can see that I am offering you better than a fair price for it," the fat man said. "In fact, It's an outrageous price. I hope you won't reveal it to anyone."

They were standing in the garden where Ogden had found her when he first drove up. The old lady leaned on her hoe and squinted her eyes beneath her bonnet. Then, gazing around at the dilapidated barn and weed choked pasture, she loosed a stream of snuff juice that expertly and deliberately missed by less than the thickness of an onion skin, the patent leather shoes the fat man was wearing. Appearing not to notice, he awaited her answer.

"Oh, it's not just the price, Mr. Hildebrandt," she said. "It's a heap of other things, too."

"I know," he sighed sympathetically. "It's where you and Abner raised your boys, and-"

"Oh, they'd have been raised most anywhere better'n here," she said. "I always hated we was so far from town they didn't get the schoolin' they shoulda had. They's really pretty smart y'know."

"Yes'm," he said, "I know, but-"

" 'Specially that Odis. You ought to hear him read sometime."

"I'm sure-"

"He can do near 'bout the whole Book of Job, an' do the verily's an' the saiths, an' everything."

"Oh, he's a clever young man. No doubt about-"

"An' Rooster. He'd a been a crackerjack 'countant. He can add up a column of figgers now quicker'n you can write 'em."

Ogden didn't really care to listen to Odis' "verily's" or time Rooster adding "figgers", but he was beginning to be resigned to hearing about it unless he could think of a way to steer the conversation back onto track.

"Now that Tiny-" she began, and Ogden was glad Abner had died before more children were born. Otherwise he would be there until midnight, and might be, anyway. "He ain't all that rip roarin' smart, but he'd a-probably been the best restaurant man in the country, if'n he didn't eat all the profits," she chuckled.

Ogden sensed he might lose control of the conversation, and getting a little desperate, he searched for other reasons to be sympathetic and get back on the subject he had come to discuss. As a seasoned politician, he knew sympathy was a sure route to a widow's heart. He took a new tack.

"Yes, I can see it is so peaceful and quiet out here, and you can't find that just any-"

"Quiet!" she said. "Sometimes I get so fed up with the quiet I want to start shootin' just to see if there's anything alive around here!"

He supposed that if there was anything alive, she would probably talk it to death, and shooting it would be a mercy.

"All the more reason to buy a little cottage and move into tow-"

" 'Course there ain't no nosy neighbors to bother you out here," she said.

"No, that's true-"

"There's plenty's of times I wisht we'd a-had 'em," she said.

"You could have all you wanted in town," he brightened, surprised he was able to complete a sentence.

"Then I never coulda got all my work done," she said.

But Ogden knew he had her thinking "town", now, and he rushed to press his advantage.

"You could have all the conveniences in town," he urged, "even a dishwasher and-" he looked around, spotting the privy, added, "indoor plumbing."

"Oh no," she said. "Only a rat trap suck-egg houn' dog would go **inside** the house!"

She had him there; and while he was searching vainly for another opening, she gave him one.

"Wouldn't be too far to the store, if we's in town, would it?" she said.

Hildebrandt perked up at the simple thought. "No Ma'am. It's just a hop, skip and a jump to a store at either end of town."

"The boys'd much druther have fresh stuff out'n the garden than store bought things. You never know where they come from, or how long they been there," she said, loosening another stream of juice that caught a grasshopper on the edge of a collard leaf.

"There's a curb market right on the square!" Score one for Ogden.

"I know 'bout that," she said. "Been there lots of times to buy grapes for jam when ours weren't ripe yet."

"Then you can see what an advantage it would be to move to town!" Ogden exclaimed, perhaps a little too anxious.

"Oh, I can see how City folks might like it, but I'm not too sure," she said.

"But you just said-" a note of dismay had definitely crept into his voice.

I know," she answered, "but you just get to thinkin' about all the other reasons I got for not selling."

"What might those reasons be, Madame?" he asked, regaining his patience. Now, at last, maybe he was about to hear an objection he could handle.

"Well, you know six generations of Bohannon's have lived here," she said.

"But you have already said you didn't have any

sentimental attachment from that point of view," he countered.

"No. I said the boys woulda been better off if'n they's gone to school more; even though that Odis is-

"I know!" Ogden exclaimed. Then quieter, "I mean, I know. He's a very clever young man-

"He sure is. Have I told you how he can-

"Oh yes! I know he can read Job and Psalms and the Gospels, and probably Genesis and Revelations and-

"Naw. He ain't too good at Revelations. Say's it sorta scares him," she said. "But you take Exodus and Ruth, he's just crazy about them. Says they're exciting 'cause of the wars and the Pharoah, an' -"

"Madame, can't we-

"Now, Rooster, he likes Numbers; but I've already told you-

"Mrs. Bohannon, can't we-" Ogden was pleading with his eyes, but she paid no attention.

"Tiny likes Song of 'Salmon", he calls it; though I think it's too much for a boy his age-

"Please," Ogden's voice quivered a little.

"—But he likes that story where Jesus turns the water into wine."

Ogden Hildebrandt had been a lawyer and politician long enough to know that it was a distinct advantage for a politician to possess not only unending patience, but gray hair to make him look mature, and hemorrhoids to make him look concerned. Ogden had both, and thought he had patience, too. Now he was wondering if he weren't going to develop an ulcer to go with them.

"Madame, I know your sons are not only geniuses, but God fearing and upright members of the Community! They are doubtless Pillars of the Church, and supporters of everything good, wonderful and progressive. I know they can read, cipher and fry turnips! But can we **please** get back to business!"

"Oh no. Tiny ain't **never** fried no turnips. You **boil** them. Come to think of it, he mighta fried some one time. He's always a-tryin' something new-"

"Madame, **PLEASE!** Business!" Ogden shouted.

"Mr. Hildebrandt, you're goin' to have to learn to control yourself, or I'll have to ask you to leave," she said, a little indignantly.

"Very well. I'm all right now," he said quietly. "I'm under control. Now, will you please give me just one, only **one**, good reason why I cannot persuade you to sell me this place at the outrageous price I have offered."

"You mean, besides the fact that I just don't want to sell?" she asked.

"**YES** . . . I mean, yes," he said.

"It's Daisy," she said. "I just couldn't go off and leave Daisy."

"Who the hel-, uh, who is Daisy?" he asked.

"Why, Daisy's my cow!" she said. "I couldn't think of sellin' her to the beef folks, and I don't know a soul who'd keep her, and there;s sure nobody who'd get up at daylight to milk her-"

"Daisy is a **cow**?" he said.

"Best Jersey in Bearswamp!" she said.

"For a cow, you won't sell-"

"Oh, not just a cow. There's Old Bet, too," she said. "old Bet's a-"

"Don't tell me. Let me guess. A MULE!"

"Right! You're catchin' on quick. You're pretty perky," she said. "Say! You ain't married, are you?"

"Wha-" he stammered

"You know I'm a widow, an' not the worst cook in the world, either. Maybe you'd like to stay for dinner?"

"Madame, I'm, I'm, I'd-"

"You'd like to think it over some, no doubt. Well, that's all right. Some other time maybe-"

"No! I don't want time to think it over! I just want to **buy** the place, **NOT** marry it!"

"Okay! You don't have to be so touchy. I like younger men, anyhow."

Recovering his aplomb, Hildebrandt shook himself. Then, adjusting his glasses and drawing himself up to his full height, he said, "Madame, I was hoping it would not come to this."

"You mean, marrying me," she said innocently.

"No, I do **NOT** mean, marrying you! I mean **FORECLOSING!**"

"Foreclosing what?" she said.

"I mean foreclosing the mortgage I have held for twelve years. I mean foreclosing the mortgage signed by your good for nothing - except - breeding - worthless - brats **HUSBAND!**" he shouted, waving the deed under her nose.

Gripping the hoe handle tightly, she raised it a couple of feet and said, "Maybe you had better leave, Mr. Hildebrandt."

"You have until the 15th to come up with the money," he said. "Then you and Daisy and Old Bet and your Bible reading boys, and the whole kit and kaboodle of you will have to be out of here!"

"You'd better get out of here, or I'll be suing you!"

"Suing ME! For what?" he said.

"Breach of Promise! You didn't marry me!"

"I'd poison you before I'd marry you!" he shouted.

"I'd take it before I'd marry you!, you- **GIT!**" she said, brandishing the hoe.

"I'm leaving," he said, backing away. "I'm leaving now, but I'll be back!" He shouted, waving the paper. "I'll be back on the 15th, and you'd better be ready to move out!"

So saying, he crawled into his long sleek limousine and departed.

As she mounted the steps to the front porch, Otis, Tiny, Rooster and Polly were coming out of the house. They

couldn't hear what was being said, but they had watched the scene from the parlor window.

"Looked like you sure had him goin' there for awhile, Ma. Did you find out anything?" Odis asked.

She sat in the green ladder back rocker and rocked a couple of times before answering. "Yes," she said, and loosed a stream of snuff juice over the bannister. "He'd rather poison me than marry me," she chuckled.

"I don't blame him for that," Otis said. "Anything else?"

"Don't you remember your Pa a-payin' off that mortgage on this place right afore he died?" she said.

"Yeah. I remember," Odis said. "I was just a little bitty feller, but we took the wagon to town and had Old Bet shoed while he went and paid it off. It was right after we sold the crop that year, an' it was a pretty good crop."

"He had that job with the WPA, too. Remember?" she said.

"That's right," Rooster said. "'The crop paid the mortgage, an' the WP and A bought the groceries.' I remember him sayin' that."

"I remember the groceries," Tiny said.

"You 'uz too little to remember anything else," Ma said.

"If the mortgage has been paid, what is all the worry about?" Polly put in.

"Do you remember him comin' out of that office with any kind of paper, Otis?" Ma asked.

"It was a long time ago, an' I'se pretty little; but I don't remember anything, 'cept he bought me some peppermint an' I stayed in the wagon suckin' on it 'til him and Hildebrandt came back from Shorty's Saloon," Odis said. "it was a while, and I remember Hildebrandt slappin' him on the back an' pushin' him onto the wagon seat."

"Was he drunk?" Ma asked.

"Yeah, but Hildebrandt weren't," Otis said.

"Then, if'n there **was** a paper, Hildebrandt could of got it off'n him while they 'us drinkin', couldn't he?" she said.

"Don't see why not," Odis said. "Pa weren't in no shape t' drive when they came back. Old Bet brung us home."

"What's all this leading up to?" Polly asked.

"That paper you saw Hildebrandt wavin' at me when he left was the mortgage," Ma said, "or he **claimed** it was."

"You think Pa didn't pay it, after all?" Rooster asked.

"No, I'd a-knowed it, if he hadn't, an' I was so busy tryin' to feed a family on nothing but greens and fatback I never thought about askin' him 'bout no papers," she said. "Something else, too. Wasn't long after that your Pa died, an' he died happy. He couldn't of done that unless he'd paid off that mortgage."

"I remember all them greens," Rooster said. "I thought we'd have to drink kerosene to keep the cut-worms from eatin' us up."

"You think Hildebrandt mighta poisoned him Ma?" Tiny asked, fascinated with the idea of somebody's being poisoned.

"No. He didn't have to. Abner poisoned himself on Shorty's rot-gut."

"When's all this foreclosin' takin' place?" Otis asked.

"He say's we got 'til the fifteenth before we have to move."

"Well, we got the money, so we ain't goin' to hafta move," Odis said, "but I ain't goin' to pay it twice, if Pa's already paid it."

"How we goin' to prove he paid it?" Polly asked.

"It's **proved**, as far as I'm concerned," Ma said.

The boys all nodded agreement, but they weren't looking forward to a tangle with Sam Hundley and his deputies, in case Hildebrandt wasn't bluffing, and Otis didn't think he was.

"Ma, is Dendy Carter or Charlie Taylor still livin'?" Otis asked.

"Why, yes. I hadn't heard of 'em dying," she said. "last I heard, they were livin' over at the Home."

"Ogden was in with 'em when Pa paid the mortgage, wasn't he?" Odis asked.

"You don't think those two old sweeties had anything to do with it, do you?" Polly asked.

"No. They're straight as plumb bobs," Ma said.

"I know," Otis said. "I just want to talk to them. They might know something about it. After that, I'll be gone for a couple of days."

"Where're you goin'?" Polly asked.

"Back to the Fair," Odis said.



DENDY DEPOSES

It was the Big Day of the Week at the Foothills Convalescent Home For the Gracefully Aging. That meant a Domino Tournament in the Parlor, and a Full Gospel Meeting in the Dining Room, led this week by the Reverend James Edward (Jim Ed) Fuzzel of the PBC Evangelical Society. Jim Ed maintained that the letters stood for "Praised Be Christ", not "Pay By Check" as wags and other detractors claimed.

It wasn't that Jim Ed was greedy or self-serving. It was just that he regarded insolvency, especially his own, as the First Deadly Sin, and chose to gather sums, and leave souls to others. As far as he knew, there wasn't a bank in the country where you could deposit souls, let alone write a check on them.

Therefore, Jim Ed spent a disproportionate amount of his time avoiding that sin by increasing the Lord's Treasury, with himself as the Divinely Appointed Treasurer.

In any case, although the bank balance grew, his activities led to no noticeable increase in the Harvest of Heathens in Upstate Carolina. But in all fairness, it might be said that the Upstate Heathens were a particularly resistant bunch. And, to give him his due, Rev. Fuzzel seldom neglected to flail Old Scratch, given opportunity, right along with the IRS, Demon Rum and other transgressors.

In "The Gospel According to Jim Ed", it was stated specifically that, although Satan could assume any form, it would most likely that of an IRS Investigator. If the Government was often portrayed as "being in league with the Devil", that was just the way Jim Ed saw it. Ample donations, of course, would "keep this ministry alive and fighting the Devil

whatever form he took", in spite of the fact it was "barely scrapin' by..."

No harm done. People liked that sort of thing, and if it made old ladies feel better to sign their Social Security pensions over to the Lord by way of PBC, so much the better. After all, one had to make sacrifices, and Jim Ed was all too willing to give them the opportunity.

His biggie, and the vehicle that made him a celebrity, was his weekly radio show, "Bring On The Bible", in which the Reverend wrestled the Devil in a Winner Take All match. Listeners fed the kitty, and the Devil seldom got a cut.

Locally, it was carried on WFU, which the same wags that punned at PBC were quick to dub, "We Fleece U". The Reverend didn't mind. The noise of their laughter could hardly be heard, if he closed windows of his Rolls Royce on the way to the bank.

Odis paused in the entrance to the Dining Hall where J.E. was flailing away to the edification of a rapt group of well heeled spinsters and widows and a few nodding men. (FCHGA was NOT for the indigent.)

One of the men would rouse himself from time to time to shout a timely "AMEN!" when Jim Ed struck a particularly voluble high.

The Amener had just missed his timing a little when he "amened" the question, "Are you goin' to ogle them short skirts?"; without waiting for the follow up, "Or turn your face away, and **shaaaame** the Devil?" Jim Ed drew out that "shame" part for effect, and it sounded pretty good, although it had little effect on the Amener.

One might have thought the Reverend had spent some time at the Seminary. The way he pronounced "God" as "Gaw-wud" would have fooled anyone...and did. Otis had to admit, the boy had a captivating delivery.

He also observed that, while Satan was taking a pasting today, the Tax Collectors must have gotten the day off. Or, it

may have been that Jim Ed had noticed Dolly Mae Reiley's hams were of a proportion to have hiked her skirt up several inches in the rear; thighs and bosom were of a proper ratio to the hams. Jim Ed seldom missed such things, and Dolly Mae was on duty in the Dining Hall that day. Her Mama was the cook.

"The Lord may STRIIIEEKE YOU BLIND, if you gaze upon the luscious, er...I mean lascivious displays some young women make of themselves these days," Jim Ed intoned, as Dolly Mae swung by unheeding, if not innocent. Jim Ed must have thought, since he had pointed out the sin, he was entitled to examine it without fear of Divine Reprisal. His gaze didn't stray from Dolly Mae's departing form.

Covering an eye with one hand, while keeping the other on Dolly, the Amener said, "I believe I'll risk one eye."

"I'm lookin' for Mr. Dendy Carter and Mr. Charlie Taylor," Odis said to the cook, who was taking in the sermon while the noon meal was in the oven.

"That's Dendy over there with one hand over his bad eye," Mrs. Reiley, a buxom lady with hams of her own, said. "Charlie's probably in the Domino Tournament. He wouldn't miss that even for Reverend Fuzzel," she said with a sigh, never taking her eyes off the Reverend, who never took his off Dolly Mae.

Otis decided the Domino Tournament might be easier to compete with than Dolly Mae. However, upon entering the Parlor, he was quickly ordered to sit down and be quiet, if he wanted to stay there. This was the District and the winner would be chosen to represent the Home at the Big Regional in Anderson. No small stakes here. This was for the Big Beans.

He had no choice but to sit and wait. He sat...and he waited. There was a steady clack of Dominoes being played, punctuated from time to time with a "HAH!", Got you that time, George!", followed by cackling laughter from the winner, and "Set 'em up again" from the loser.

Even Tournament Domino Players take a break once in a while, and when one was declared, Odis felt it was safe to approach the one addressed as Charlie.

"Mr. Taylor?" he said.

"Can't stop (clack) now. Gotta (clack) go pee (clack)," he said, and rushed out of the room.

When he came back in a few minutes, the game had still not been called to order. Otis approached him again.

"Mr. Taylor, I need to talk to you a min-"

"When you gotta (clack) go, you gotta- Thay! You (clack) play Dominoesth (clack)?" Charlie asked.

"Nossir, never learned," Odis answered. "I came to talk to you about something el-"

"Didn't think (clack) tho. Hadn't (clack) then you here be(clack)fore. You (clack) not with (clack) that preathin' crowd (clack), are you (clack)?"

"Nossir, I'm-" Odis said

"Who are you (clack), then!"

"I'm Otis Bohannon, and I need to talk to you," he said, hoping to get in a full sentence.

"How's that?" Charlie said, cupping a hand to his ear.

"I SAID-"

"No need to (clack) thout, I ain't deaf," Charlie said.

"I'm-"

"Who'd you (clack) thay you wash (clack)? You look familiar (clack)"

"Abner Bohannon's boy, Odis," Otis said a little louder than was necessary. The room suddenly got quiet. Everyone was listening. It was when the dominoes had quit clacking it dawned on Odis that the clacking he was hearing wasn't dominoes, but Charlie's ill fitting dentures.

"Abner Bohannon! (clack) Why didn't (clack) you thay tho (clack)? I'd have known (clack) you (clack) anywhere! (clack)"

"Yessir, an' I'd just like to talk-"

"Let me (clack) take my teeth (clack) out (clack) tho we can talk (clack)."

Otis was relieved to get rid of the infernal noise that was taking his mind off what he came there to discuss.

"There, now that's better," Charlie said, laying the teeth on the table next to the sofa where Odis was sitting. "I just put 'em in because they always take a picture of the winner. You want to talk about Abner?"

"Yessir. Do you remember when you all held the mortgage on our place?"

"Oh yeah," Charlie said. "We held a lot of Mortgages in those days. Folks couldn't pay. They barely could eat. We held off long as we could about foreclosin', an' most people finally got paid up when things got better. Those were hard times."

"Yessir," Otis said. "I was wondering if you remembered."

"Like it was yesterday," Charlie said.

"Then you might remember when Pa paid."

"TIME! GENTLEMEN!"

"Got to get back to the table!" Charlie said. "Good to see you, Abner," Charlie said, offering his hand.

"Otis,- But I need to ask you-"

"Talk to you after the tournament!" Charlie said. "Stick around!"

Either the dominoes or Charlie's teeth were clacking again, and Otis decided Dolly Mae might be less competition, after all. Feeling his wallet pocket to make sure it was buttoned, he headed back to the Dining Hall, where Dendy Carter was taking great delight in having discovered the Reverend's warning regarding the danger of losing an eye to have been unfounded.

As Odis came down the hallway, Jim Ed's voice was clearly heard building up to a patented Fuzzel fusillade. The Devil was about to catch Heaven, as it were.

Stepping just inside the door, he observed Dolly was setting tables for the noon meal that was to follow the services. For Dolly to reach the salt shakers, it was necessary for her to stretch and bend in such a way as to leave even less unrevealed than before.

Jim Ed, however, never faltering, clinched both teeth and fists for emphasis, "In the struggle with Satan, I make no buns-, I-er- that is-er **bones** about it-"

Suddenly there was a commotion as Dendy, also bending to improve his line of sight, risking both eyes this time, fell out of his chair onto the floor.

"Damnation!" Dendy said.

"Godamighty!" said the Reverend. "Er-that is, God is Mighty!" he trailed off, losing his train of thought in the collective gasps of the good sisters who were departing in a righteous huff of shocked indignation. Jim Ed knew when he was licked.

"Let us pray," intoned the Reverend, silently cursing the lecherous old geezer that cost him a chance at a fat collection plate.

"Might as well do somethin', as long as I'm on my knees, anyway," Dendy said.

* * * * *

When Mrs. Reiley rang the dinner bell, the Tournament and Preaching both immediately adjourned. Mrs. Reiley's hams and buns, the kind you bake and butter respectively, were famous. Odis was helping Dendy to his feet when Charlie came in.

"There you are, Abner," Charlie said, coming up to Otis, and helping him brush Dendy off.

Odis was glad to note the clacking teeth were not in place. Apparently Charlie only needed them for pictures, not chewing.

"What happened to this old goose, Abner?" Charlie asked

"Otis-" Odis corrected

"He fall out of his chair tryin' to look up Widder Massingale's dress again?" Charlie asked matter-of-factly.

"None of your business, you gape-eyed old windbag!" Dendy retorted. "Least I ain't forgot what I'm lookin' for," he said.

"I bet you was makin' eyes at Miz Reiley," Charlie taunted.

Otis, deciding Charlie was close enough without his hornin' in, kept a discreet silence.

"Come on have dinner with us, Abner," Charlie said, taking Odis by the arm.

"Abner?" Dendy said, offering his hand.

"No... Otis," Odis said, shaking Dendy's hand.

"Then who the heck is Abner?" Charlie asked.

"He's my Pa," Otis answered.

"Oh, that's right. Abner's your Pa. You tol' me," Charlie said.

"Then, who's this?" Dendy asked. "I done forgot."

"I'm Otis," Odis said.

"Well, I didn't think you were Abner," Dendy said. "I knew Abner. But you look like him."

"I'm his boy, Otis."

"Glad to know you, son," Dendy said, shaking Odis' hand again.

"How's Abner doing?" Dendy asked.

"I'm afraid he's dead," Otis said.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Dendy said.

"That's all right. It was a long time ago," Odis said.

"I didn't even know he was sick," Dendy said. "Nobody ever tells you anything around here."

They were all being seated, now, and conversations became muted as Jim Ed, though suffering some ego loss and still disgruntled over his wallet damage, prepared to say the blessing.

As they were eating, Otis managed to get the conversation steered around to the subject of the mortgage.

"Mr. Charlie, you said you remembered when Pa paid off the mortgage," Odis said, to open the subject.

"Like it was yesterday," Charlie said.

" 'T' was yesterday," Dendy said.

"No, it wasn't," Charlie said, "It was a hundred years ago, you old cooter. You can't even remember if you've got your pants on."

"Well, if it was that long ago, you're the only one around that could remember it!" Dendy snorted.

"It was fifteen or twenty years, actually," Charlie said.

"Did you see him pay it," Charlie said. "We were always right there in the office tendin' to business."

"Did you take the money?" Odis asked.

"No," Charlie said. "Ogden tended to it. He was new there then, but we watched to see that he done it right."

"Had to watch him like a hawk," Dendy put in. "Never did trust that skunk. Don't know why Penrose ever sold out to him, anyway."

"He had to sell to someone, and none of us had the money then to buy him out," Charlie said, " 'Sides he was Penrose's nephew."

"That's right," Dendy said. "Abner paid him off in cash. He counted it and dropped a \$10 bill on the floor."

"How can you remember that?" Otis asked, astonished at Dendy's prodigious memory for detail.

" 'Cause he watched Miss Finksworthy stoop over to pick it up, probably," Charlie said. "He'd sure remember that."

"Did Pa get some sort of paper to prove he's paid it?" Odis asked.

"Sure. He was supposed to get the canceled deed of trust," Charlie said.

"He didn't get it, though," Dendy said. "Ogden slapped him on the back, and they went down to Shorty's to celebrate."

"How do you remember that?" Charlie asked, beginning to be a little amazed himself.

" 'Cause, when Ogden came back, he handed it to Miss Finksworthy, and told her to put it in his safe and he would give it to Abner next time he saw him. Said Abner was too drunk to be trusted with an important paper like that," Dendy said.

"I know, and you remembered it, because you watched Miss Finksworthy bend over to put it in Ogden's safe," Charlie said.

"Hey! What's your rush, Abner?" Dendy asked.

"Gotta go see a man about a cow!" Otis said. "Thank's for lunch."

* * * * *

When Odis got back from his second trip to the Fair two days later, he had a smiling Hank and a dour Ashby in tow.

"Ma, these two hobos want to hide out in the barn for a couple of days. That all right?" he said.

"Long as they don't set the hay on fire," she said.

That night, as Hank lay snoring away, Old Bet came over, gazed upon him with a faint light of recognition and began to munch at the bale of hay Hank was using for a pillow.



THE PURPLE COW GANG STRIKES AGAIN

"Listen to this, Sheriff," Deputy Raleigh Gates chuckled, pointing to an article in the Upstate Weekly.

Sheriff Sam Hundley looked up from the stack of "Wanted's" he was shuffling through.

"Says, 'Deputy Lance Wagener is reported resting after an encounter with a gang of desperadoes on the highway near Wister's Crossroads.

According to Deputy Wagener, he was jumped from behind, disarmed, and his motorcycle tossed into a ditch. Finding himself in a desperate situation, the Deputy says he had no choice but to attack. A terrific fight ensued in which he was able to rearm himself and extract his motorcycle from the ditch.

From what we have been able to piece together from his statement, there were at least nine desperadoes in number, and they made their escape in a small foreign car of undetermined make. In the most puzzling aspect of the case, he says they were all dressed as purple cows. The Deputy showed no physical signs of the struggle.

The Sheriff's Department so far has declined to issue a statement, other than to say that Deputy Wagener, due to extreme fatigue, has been released from further duties indefinitely.' What do you think of that?"

Sam bit down on his well worn pipe stem, and said, "Looks like old Lance finally bit off more than he could chew and Elwood finally had an excuse to get rid of him."

"I knew that would happen sooner or later," Gates said, "but what about that herd of purple cows?"

"Sounds like a lot of bull to me," Hundley said, and, sucking on his cold corn cob, went back to shuffling his "Wanted" posters. He always cleared his file on the fifteenth of the month.

A moment later he looked up and said, "Ogden Hildebrandt said he was comin' by this morning to get you to serve some papers for him. He'll be by pretty soon."

"Who's he evicting this time?" Gates asked.

"The Bohannons," the Sheriff answered.

* * * * *

"All right, you know what to do, now," Otis said. "All the gear is over there in that sack."

"This is going to be a pleasure," Hank said. "I been lookin' for a chance like this, but I never thought I'd get it," he smiled a real smile.

"If I know Hildebrandt, he won't wait 'til the sun goes down. He'll be here by ten o'clock. Y'all better get on down there and get ready," Odis said.

"My pleasure," Hank said, rising and going over to the sack.

"You won't have trouble finding your way over to the woods next to the kudzu patch on the Patterson place, will you?" Otis asked.

"Right through your woods and down the holler."

"That's it," Odis said. "I'll be there as soon as I can, and we'll take care of the rest of the business."

"You said half?" Hank said.

"Half, it is," Otis responded.

"You know I'd a done it for nothing," he said.

"Guess you outsmarted me this time," Odis said.

"It's about time," Hank smiled.

* * * * *

At five minutes after ten a trail of dust a quarter of a mile away, coming down the clay drive to the Bohannon house announced the impending arrival of Ogden Hildebrandt's big LaSalle, driven by Deputy Gates; Ogden in the back.

Otis, Rooster, Tiny and Ma Bohannon were standing on the porch waiting for them when they drove up. Gates got out and walked around the car, and Ogden crawled out of the back seat.

"Howdy, Odis. Howdy boys. Howdy Mrs. Bohannon," Gates greeted the clan somewhat sheepishly.

Ogden peered dourly at the group, obviously not approving the friendly manner with which they greeted the representative of the law.

"Get on with it, Gates. This isn't a family reunion," Ogden said.

"You watch your mouth, Hildebrandt," Ma said. "We've known Rolly since he was a pup. He's always welcome in my house whenever he has the urge to come."

"It's not going to be your house much longer, Madam," Ogden snarled. "Get on with it, Gates. Do your duty."

"I'm sorry, folks, I've got to do this. It's my-"

"I know. It's just your duty, Rolly," Ma said sympathetically. "We'd think less of you, if you didn't do it. Come on in and have a glass of tea, anyway. It's gettin' hot out here."

It was true. The October sun was bearing down in a last blaze of Indian summer. The fields were bare and brown with stubble, and the dirt road was hot and dusty. Leaves were toasting the world in a final burst of golden hue before first frost and winter winds sent them to the forest floor to become rich Piedmont mulch for the ages.

"You can come, too, Hildebrandt, if you aren't afraid I'll poison you," she said.

"Madam, I assure you, that is the least of my worries," Ogden replied, but he was sweating profusely.

After they were all seated in the roomy parlor, and had taken a sip or two of tea, Ogden, who had barely touched his, said, "Are you going to serve those papers, or am I going to have to go get the sheriff?"

"Let the boy finish his tea, Hildebrandt. Ain't no hurry, is there?" Ma said.

"I just want to get on with it," Hildebrandt said. "There's no use stalling around."

"I guess he's right, Rolly. Get on with it," she said.

Raleigh shuffled uncomfortably, then, taking a deep breath, said, " 'Cordin' to my duty, I got to hereby serve you first with this foreclosure notice, and which, if you can't pay the amount shown due, Mr. Hildebrandt then has the right to demand that I serve these eviction papers and evict you."

Raleigh reddened as he handed the foreclosure papers to Mrs. Bohannon. She took them and scanned them, although she couldn't read them.

"Here, Otis. See what this says. I ain't got on my specs."

Odis took the paper and scanned it. "Whooeee, Ogden! Where is Sam Tuckett did you come up with a figure like that!" he exclaimed.

Ogden pursed his lips primly, and said, "You will notice the interest hasn't been paid since Abner died, and I am entitled to that. It's legal."

"It's highway robbery," Rooster said.

Tiny, looking over Odis' shoulder, said, "Lordy! You could buy every hot dog in the world with that much!"

"I take it you can't meet those terms," Ogden said. "Deputy serve the eviction notice."

"Sure you don't want to marry me, instead, Hildebrandt. I'm a pretty good cook, you know," Ma said.

"You never give up, do you, Madam," Ogden said. "Serve the notice, Deputy."

Gates reddened again and reached toward his pocket for the other paper.

"Hold it," Otis said. "You never can tell how much Ma might have tucked away in the tea kettle. Let me go see."

Ogden's eyes followed him apprehensively as he left the room. They heard him rambling in the wood box, then he reappeared with a large sheaf of bills in one hand. Ogden and Raleigh stared at him speechless and pop-eyed as he counted out the bills.

"Here you count 'em and you can put them in this cigar box," Odis said, handing him the stack he had just counted and an El-Roi-Ropo cigar box. "Pa used to keep a little stashed away in here. I don't guess we will need it anymore."

It was a crestfallen disgruntled Hildebrandt and a broadly grinning Gates that strode back to the big limousine.

"Come see me when you're in town, boys," he waved.

"See you, Rolly," Otis said.

"Should of married me when you had the chance, Hildebrandt," Ma said.

"Let's get out of here, Gates," Ogden snarled.

Gates wrestled the big car around and headed back down the clay drive to the highway about a half mile away. It raised a big cloud of dust, but the buoyant Bohannon's didn't mind. They happily waved the car out of sight. Ogden didn't notice. He was slouched in the back seat sourly contemplating the cigar box full of fresh new twenties. They looked familiar, but no...that couldn't be.

He was still slouched in a thick stormy stunned stupor when Raleigh suddenly braked the heavy car to a skidding halt.

"What in thunder-" he said.

"What's wrong with you, Gates! Can't you dr-" he brokeoff when he spotted the reason for the halt.

A large yellow cow with big pink and purple polka dots stood sideways to them, blocking the road. A large daisy was twined in its horns. It had huge cow-eyes with eyelashes, at least six inches long that blinked demurely from a face that bore a silly grin.

"Good God! What is that!" Hildebrandt roared.

As he spoke, the twin muzzles of a long black double barreled shotgun grew from the cow's protruding flank.

"Look out! Its got a gun," Hildebrandt cried and made a dive for the floor. "Shoot it, deputy!"

There was the roar of a blast, and Ogden, cowering on the floor, head buried in his hands, shouted, "I'm killed. It's got me! Don't shoot!"

"Dangnation!" Raleigh shouted from the floor under the dash. He couldn't have gotten to his revolver even if he had not left it on his dispatcher's desk at the office.

The blast of bird shot had peppered the windshield, shredded through upholstery, made a sieve of the radiator, shattered one headlight and blew out the left front tire.

The cow was thrown back several feet by the recoil and nearly stumbled. Inside its bowels there was some momentary confusion not observed by the cowering figures in the car.

There was a muffled, "What the hell are you doin', Ashby. You liked to blowed my ass off!"

"I didn't mean to let off both barrels. This thing ain't got no safety," came from the rear.

"Well hurry and load up again before they get wise. And don't shoot no more unless you have to!" Orders from the front.

"What did you say? My ears are roaring!"

"Load the damn thing and don't shoot no more until I tell you!"

The long blue cylinders disappeared for a moment, then reappeared shortly. There was no danger of observation from the cowering duo on the floor of the limo.

What'll I do now?" from the gunner.

"Just keep that gun pointed in their direction an' I'll handle it." Hank had Ogden Hildebrandt where he wanted him, and he wasn't about to pass up this opportunity.

"Stand and deliver!" shouted the cow. Hank had been reading Dick Turpin, The Highwayman of Olde England.

"What the hell is it talking about?" Ogden said.

"I think it wants to rob us," Gates said, reaching for his wallet.

"Oh, no!" Ogden said, clutching the cigar box to his bosom.

"Throw down the cash box!" the cow said, and the shotgun shook ominously. Ashby had been reading the Cisco Kid.

"I think you better give it to her," Raleigh advised. "I think she means business."

Hildebrandt looked longingly at the box and clutched it even closer. Inside were his hard earned, if ill-gotten, gains. He had already made a large investment, and if he couldn't possess the farm with the large profit it would bring, then surely he was at least entitled to the money in the box for all the trouble he had gone to.

"Go away! I won't be robbed by a cow!" he shouted.

"Shoot!" said the head.

The next blast finished off the other headlight and the remaining front tire. The hood ornament went flying off as if it had suddenly tired of being the main event in a shooting gallery.

"Throw her the damn box, or I'll come back there and throttle you!" Raleigh yelled.

Ogden took a last longing look at the El-Roi-Ropo box and yielded.

"Don't shoot no more!" Raleigh yelled. "Here it comes!"

"Don't throw it!" the cow yelled. "Bring it out here and put it down in front of me."

Raleigh gingerly complied.

"We don't want your wallet, Deputy, just the box," the cow said.

Raleigh quickly stuck his wallet back in his pocket, and didn't think it would be necessary to mention that part to Hildebrandt.

"Now get in the car and take off," said the smiling cow.

"Take off in that?" Raleigh said.

The cow blinked at the sad looking hulk of a car and apparently saw the futility of that order.

"There's a mule and wagon in the barn. You can walk back to the house and borrow that," the cow said. Hank chuckled to himself, thinking, "An' you won't even have to bring the mule back. She knows the way by herself."

* * * * *

"Rolly Gates, if you say 'purple cow' to me again, I'm puttin' you on administrative leave, an' you can be the fry cook down at the White Star," Sam Hundley said to his star deputy. "And if you breathe one word of it to another deputy, I'll have you committed!"

"All right, Sheriff, have it your way. But I'm tellin' you what happened."

"I know. Ogden Hildebrandt's done shouted it at me ten times. Now he's spreadin' it all over town."

"Well, you can't just do nothing! The man's been robbed!"

"Ain't no different from what he's been doin' to other folks for years," Sam said. "He had it comin'." He paused a moment, then said, "You sure the Bohannon boys didn't have anything to do with it?"

"Nossir. They were all at the house when we left, and they were there when we came back and borrowed the wagon. Even Hildebrandt would tell you that," Raleigh said. Then he added, "It was a c-" but managed to stop himself as the sheriff shot him a meaningful look.

"Look, Gates. Let me tell you something. What do you think people will say when Hildebrandt tells 'em he was robbed by a purple cow?"

"They'll think he's crazy," Raleigh answered.

"Exactly!" Sam said. "And what do you think they will say if we run all over the country askin' people if they'd seen a

purple cow with daisies in its horns carryin' a shotgun?"

"They'd think we were crazy."

"You're catchin' on. Now just keep your mouth shut, an' maybe some day a purple cow will just walk in here, an' we'll let you arrest her," Sam smiled. "Until then we'll just ignore the matter unless Ogden forces our hand, an' I don't think he will, after he realizes he's been made a laughing stock."

"Maybe you're right," Raleigh said, rubbing his chin. He would keep his mouth shut. He had no desire to go back to the White Star frying hamburgers.

"Besides that, there's an election comin' up, an' Keowee County folks ain't famous for electin' loco sheriffs," Sam said.

* * * * *

"Oh it was beautiful!" Hank said dreamily.

He and Ashby had removed the cow suit and Gertrude lay sprawled on the ground, still smiling at Otis, who returned the grin.

"Tell it one more time how beautiful it was, Setton. I want to hear it just one more time," Hank said.

"Well, after I let loose both barrels-"

"I know. I've already heard it ten times," Odis said.

"Just let 'im tell it one more time," Hank pleaded.

"We don't have time," Otis said. "Sam Hundley's liable to come pokin' around out here, an' I don't want to have to do any explainin' to him."

"What're we goin' to do with Gertrude?" Ashby asked. "She's been a good old cow. I hate to get rid of her."

"Well, you can keep her and explain her to the first deputy that asks you about her," Hank said. "We can buy another cow suit now," Hank said, fingering the wad in his pocket. "I might even want to get back in the car business, if I don't have to deal with no more Bohannons."

"There's an old well over there just inside the edge of the kudzu," Odis said. "Take her over there and pitch 'er in."

* * * * *

The big black Lab's ears stood straight up and he growled in surprise. The grizzled hermit jumped when a large yellow cow with pink and purple polka dots came sailing down the air shaft of his cave.

Going over to the strange object, he poked at it with a stick. Gertrude smiled up at him.

"Hmm, I'll be durned. Got a big yellow daisy in her horns," he said.

Sam wagged his tail and sniffed at the head with the large cow eyes, long lashes and silly grin.



HI HAT GETS SMART

Hi Hat Hiatt gazed out upon the vista of the disaster area some folks called a farm. To say it was barren would be to upgrade it several notches. It wasn't just barren; it was virtually sterile. A few scraggly chickens scratched under the chinaberry tree that shaded the porch of the shack he called home. A fat sow lay in a mud wallow under the mulberry that shaded the pig sty. Her pigs had been sold as soon as they were weaned. Hi Hat couldn't afford to feed them. A lone cow searched the pasture for grass. Ribs and bones protruding indicated the futility of the search.

"Dang this place!" Hi Hat said to no one in particular, since he was alone. His brothers had gone to work in the cotton mill and had moved to the company village over on Mill Hill.

"Dang it!" he repeated. "I gotta get out of here. I can't stand it no more."

He threw away the tepid coffee he was drinking from a tin cup with chipped blue enamel. The coffee was muddy. The water it was made from was muddy. The well was going dry, and he couldn't afford to drive any further into the rock bottom for fresher water.

"I wouldn't wish this place off on my worst ene-" his thoughts broke off as the image of his worst enemy came to mind. "Odis Bohannon!" he thought. "Yeah, Otis Bohannon. You need this place. And Miss Persnickety Polly, you need it too. It would serve you both right."

Hi Hat smiled at the thought of Odis and Polly working their fingers to the bone trying to keep this place up.

Odis and Polly were getting married sometime soon; Christmas, he'd heard. They would need a place, and if he could unload it on them, it would serve them right! He didn't know how he would manage it, but he was sure he would think of something. He **had** to!

* * * * *

"Had anymore trouble with slashed tires?" Monroe asked.

"Not lately," Rooster said from the top of the load. He was keeping a wary eye on Tiny, who was coming toward the truck with a monstrous stick of pulpwood balanced precariously on his shoulder.

"Seems like all that run of bad luck stopped right after we got back from the Fair," he said, moving out of the way, as Tiny gave a mighty heave, shoving the big bolt onto the topmost part of the load.

"Didn't tell you we went to the Big Game the second time we went down there, did I?" Rooster said, hooking the big stick into place with a wood hook.

"How did you like it?" Monroe asked. He knew the boys had never been to a football game before, and he wanted to hear about it.

"Couldn't make much heads or tails out of it. Just looked like a big brawl to me," Rooster said, "but it was worse'n the fights I've seen at Shorty's."

"Where did you sit?" Monroe asked.

"Oh, we was right down front behind our team's bench." Tiny was coming with an even bigger stick, and he was keeping an eye on that.

"What was the score?" Monroe asked. He already knew the answer, but he was curious to know what Rooster would say.

"I'm not real sure." Tiny heaved the stick onto the truck, narrowly missing Rooster, who dodged it expertly. Rooster seemed to be picking up speed in his old age. "But I think they beat us pretty bad." He straightened the stick on the load.

"That's enough, Tiny. Don't need no more!" Rooster called.

"Didn't they tell you?" Monroe asked.

"I think we were winnin' in the first part," he said. "But when they come back out after all the bands played and the purty girls twirled them sticks, they started beatin' us bad."

"That's too bad," Monroe said.

"You know, the funniest thing happened," Rooster said, climbing down from the load. "There was a bald headed old man there a-tellin' everybody what to do, and what not. That rascal had the biggest chew of tobacco I nearly ever saw. It was plumb muddy where he'd been standin' time it was all over. But that's not the funny part."

"What happened?" Monroe asked; curiosity aroused.

"Well, right after our boys started losin' bad, he near 'bout swallered that chaw, he was cussin' so hard," Rooster said.

"Yes, that was the coach," Monroe said. "Sometimes they get pretty excited."

"Well, this feller was cussin' up a storm. Then he turned around and caught a look at Tiny, and quit cussin'," Rooster said.

"That is strange," Monroe agreed.

"It was even stranger when he just broke down and cried like a baby," Rooster said. "He'd look out on the field and cuss. Then he'd look at Tiny and cry. Didn't make a lick of sense."

Monroe said. "Maybe Tiny reminded him of somebody."

* * * * *

"Hey, Odis! You old scalawag. Where you been keepin' yourself?" Hi Hat greeted Otis like a long lost brother; a thing he didn't often do, unless he had something up his sleeve.

Otis had just pulled onto the yard with a load, and was climbing out of the cab.

"Been cuttin' up any tires, lately, Hi Hat?" he said.

"Oh, Otis. You know I didn't have nothing to do with that. I done tol' you," Hi Hat said without losihg his back-slapping look.

"Oh, I believe you," Odis said. "Just don't do it no more."

"I won't," he answered, then changing the subject, "Hey, old stud, I heard you and Polly are tying the knot."

"That's what she tells me," Otis said, undoing his binders, getting ready to be unloaded. "She tol me all I had to do was get two dollars for the preacher, and show up when she hollered."

"You know, I been thinkin' about what a fine place my farm would be for you," Hi Hat smiled a snagged grin. "'Course, I wouldn't think about sellin' it right now. It's much too valable. New highway's probably goin' to split it wide open."

Odis knew for a fact, and was probably one of the few who did know, that the highway was going to miss Hi Hat's place by several miles.

"You know something?" Otis asked.

"Well, I don't know anything for sure," Hiatt answered truthfully, "but you know I got friends in high places."

"That's true," Odis acknowledged. "You got your Uncle Jake over on Redbone Ridge and brothers smack on top of Mill Hill."

"I ain't talkin' about no boot-leggin' uncles or no 'count brothers. I'm talkin' sho 'nuff high up," Hiatt said indignantly.

"Them was the highest ones I could think of," Otis said, "unless you might be talkin' about your Uncle Billy. I seen him the other day, an' he was high as a kite."

(Billy Hiatt worked at his brother Jake Hiatt's still, and was the known source of most of Jake's "spillage".)

"No, I don't mean no sop-soakin' Billy, either. You know who I mean."

"Oh yeah. You mean Hildebrandt, the Great Purple Cow Rustler," Odis said straight faced.

"That's right," Hi Hat said, ignoring the fact that Ogden had explicitly directed that there be no acknowledgment of their association. Ogden was on his own now, anyway, and the source of twenty dollar bills had dried up. Hi Hat was looking after number one.

"He goes to the Legislature an' he keeps me pretty well informed."

"Yeah, I know you're his number one advisor," Otis said dryly.

"Well, me an' him talks some," Hi Hat admitted. "That ain't the Big Thing, though," he said conspiratorially.

"You mean there's something else you ain't tellin' nobody but me, an' you want me to keep it quiet?" Odis thought he would help him get to the point.

"Well, er-yeah, you-ah-er might say that," Hi Hat said, a little surprised at arriving at his point so easily. That Otis was one dumb knocker, all right. He was going to fall into his little trap like a ripe plumb.

"What is it?" Odis asked in a low tone, all ears.

"Well, you remember Uncle Jasper?" he said. "You know, he went out to Oklahoma to work in the oil wells."

"Yeah. I remember him," Otis said.

"Well," Hiatt spoke in almost a whisper, "he tol' me some of the biggest wells they got out there are a-settin' smack on top of what they call salt domes."

"What's that got to do with your place," Otis asked.

"Well, you know it sits square on top of a dome."

"Yeah, it's on a hill, all right," Odis agreed. "What makes you think that hill's made outta salt?"

" 'Cause the well water tastes so rotten," Hiatt said. That much, at least, was the truth.

"Dig your well deeper," Otis suggested.

"Can't. That damn rock's so solid, dynamite won't hardly touch it."

"That so?" Odis said.

"Come out there sometime, an' I'll show you."

"Might just do that," Odis said.

About that time the loader operator signaled he was ready to unload Old Woco, and Otis drove on.

"See you, Otis," Hi Hat called.

"Might be out there Saturday," Odis said.

"Hot diggety dawg!" Hi Hat said, rubbing his hands. "He done fell fer it. Now I gotta get me some bait for the trap."

* * * * *

Late that evening Hi Hat stopped by Ike Muller's garage and paid him \$3 for a barrel of burned motor oil and discarded grease.

"They's about 20 gallons in there, Hi Hat," Ike said, folding the bills and sticking them into a greasy overall pocket.

"What you goin' to do with 20 gallons of burned up mess?"

"I'm goin' to grease my traps with it," Hi Hat said.

"What kind of animal you goin' to get to put his foot in a greasy-ass trap?" Ike asked.

"We'll see," Hi Hat said, as he drove off leaving Ike scratching his head.

When he got home, he struggled out to the well with the barrel and poured in the whole contents, including several greasy rags and other trash that had been thrown in the barrel. He had promised to bring the barrel back to Ike the next day.

"It ain't goin' to make the water taste no worse, anyway," Hi Hat said.

He hoped his little ruse worked. He was getting desperate.

* * * * *

Howling Howard was clipping his fingernails, which was about as much as he had done all day. In fact, he had spent most of the previous week doing nothing but growing them. Howling Howards Used Car lot was about as populated as the

central Sahara on a warm day. The only people that ever showed up were bill collectors and deputies with subpoenas.

Howling H was, to put it mildly, against the wall. He had even attempted suicide. Had the car all rigged up with the hose coming in the window, and everything. He had even written his farewell note, leaving the bills to his ex-wife, and everything else to his Aunt Matilda, an old maid who had raised him. In any case, he even flunked out at suicide. The car ran out of gas just about the time he was getting sick on exhaust fumes, and he didn't have enough money to buy more.

Having decided he wasn't the type to be a successful suicide, anyway, he was, at the time Hank and Ashby walked in on him, trying to find some way to get to Jacksonville and a job on a banana boat a friend of his had written to him about. The boat was set to sail in a week, and he was still several bucks shy of his minimum requirement.

"Hank, you old turkey, what are you doin' here?" He smiled in greeting, shaking hands all around. "I heard you done run away and joined a circus."

"I did. Meet the other end of the famous cow act of Professor Polloni's Premier Performing Pachyderms," Hank said.

"Setton Ashby, Howdy," Ashby said extending his hand.

"How's the Used Car business, Howard?" Hank asked.

"Better'n mule tradin'," Howard smiled at the reference.

"That bad, huh," Hank said.

"Couldn't be better. I can hardly replace my stock fast enough" Howard said; which was partly true, since no one would advance him money to pay for new stock, if he needed it.

"Don't b.s. an old buddy, Howard," Hank said. "How much you want for the whole she-bang?"

Howard looked at Hank and decided this was no time to beat around the bush. Besides, if Hank was going to be that

straight, he must have some cash to back him up, and obviously, he had a partner.

"Let's look at the books," he said.

An hour later they had concluded a deal, wherein Hank paid him a thousand dollars and signed a note for the balance. If Hank never paid the note, Howard was still ahead, as far as he was concerned.

The next morning Howard went to the bank and bought traveler's checks, which he paid for in new twenties that were beginning to show some wear.

* * * * *

Saturday morning Otis pulled into what passed as Hi Hat's yard. Hi Hat was standing on the porch, grinning broadly.

"Hey, old buddy!" he said. "Decided to come out and take a look, huh?"

"Don't need money, if you got rich friends," Odis returned.

"Ain't nobody here rich, yet, but whoever owns this land when they find oil is goin' to be," Hi Hat said.

"Fact is, I done decided I would sell, if the price got right," Hiatt said.

"What's a right price," Odis asked.

Now, if there was anything Hi Hat thought he was, it was sneaky, sly and subtle. He could have added "smart" to that trio, but he never thought of it. The first three would suffice.

"Let me think about it a minute, while you go around there and draw you a bucket of water," he said, sneakily, slyly and subtly.

"Wha-, O, all right," Otis said. "You're right I am pretty thirsty." Odis didn't know what Hi Hat was up to, but he thought he would find out shortly. He did, when the well rope came up covered in burnt motor oil and there was a greasy rag hanging out of the bucket. He let the bucket down again, but

about half way down, he stopped it and swung it back and forth. He heard it hit rock on both sides of the excavation. Then he drew the bucket up, closed the well box and went back to the porch. Hi Hat was snickering to himself, but he managed to get it under control before Odis came up.

"How was your drink?" he asked subtly.

"Oh, it was fi-, er-uh I changed my mind," Otis said. "I had a drink just before I left the house.

"That water has been tastin' pretty bad lately, anyhow," Hi Hat said. "Tastes greasy." ("Hee, hee, hee. He's taken the bait", Hi Hat thought slyly.)

Odis thought that, since Hi Hat was pretty sure he had taken the bait, maybe he had better jerk the line a time or two.

"Hi Hat, you serious about sellin' this place," Otis asked.

"Well, I wouldn't sell it to just anybody," Hi Hat said, "but I might consider a good old buddy like you." (Sneaky?)

"How much you figure you gotta have?"

"Well, considerin' it might have oil under it, and coal, and such stuff as that, I think I ought to get at least \$60 a acre," Hi Hat said.

"I couldn't go no more'n twenty-five," Odis said, "but I like the place so good, I'd sure love to have it."

"I couldn't let it go for nothin' like that," Hi Hat said. He would gladly have taken twenty an acre, but he wanted to really stick it to Otis, once and for all. To encourage him a little, Hi Hat dropped his price. (Sly)

"Tell you what I'll do," he said (this was subtle again), "Since you are an old buddy, an', since there ain't no promise that oil is actually there, I'll let you have it for fifty."

"I just can't do no more'n thirty-five," Odis countered.

Hi Hat's heart skipped a beat. Did he really say \$35! "I got him goin' now," he thought. "I'll try him one more and see what happens".

Trying to stifle his elation, but not doing that good a job of it, he said, "Forty, an' that's my best price. I wouldn't do

that, except you bein' such a good friend and all."

Otis hemmed and hawed, grunted and groaned; and Hi Hat nearly leaped off the porch with joy when Odis replied with a lot o' strain, "Polly's goin' to kill me, but I just **got** to have it. I'LL DO IT!"

"I just happened to have a deed right here handy," Hi Hat said. "All we got to do is fill in the blanks. You pay me and it's yours." Hi Hat could hardly restrain himself. He was churning with excitement inside. He had finally flat outsmarted his old enemy.

Odis was a little surprised that Hi Hat had thought to have the deed ready. He had one in his pocket, too, but he didn't show it to Hiatt. He had picked it up when he went by Lawyer Tillis' office to get him to search the title, which was clear. No one would lend Hi Hat any money on that place.

They went down to Uther Whitley's store where Uther filled out the deed for them and notarized Hi Hat's scrawled signature. Hi Hat got in one last sneaky by letting Otis pay Uther the fifty cent Notary's fee.

As Hi Hat gleefully recounted the stack of slightly worn new twenties Odis handed him, he said, "You don't need to worry about the title, Old Buddy, it ain't got a scratch of a pen against it."

"Oh, I trust you, Old Buddy," Otis said, "but I think you just outsmarted me."

* * * * *

Hi Hat ran up to Ogden, as the latter was walking toward the White Star for his Monday morning cup of coffee. He was not in the best of spirits, and was ready to throttle the next person that mentioned Purple Cows. He was only mildly relieved when Hi Hat failed to do so.

"Looky what I got! You thought you was so smart. I done sold that old rock heap of a farm to Odis Bohannon for twice what I would of took for it!" He showed Hildebrandt the now aging, but still crisp stack of twenty dollar bills. "Cash!" he

said. "Like takin' candy from a baby. I made him think there was oil under it! An' he fell fer it!"

Ogden looked at the bills, which by now were becoming familiar, and said, "You fool. That's where the State is going to put the rock quarry for the new highway!"



BEARSWAMP'S A-BURNIN'

Twigs snapped and leaves crackled. First frost had come, and more leaves were falling every day, except in the pines. Pines are evergreens and cast needles all year without ever losing their greenness. The needles made a soft brown carpet where one could walk silently in woods that were open and the brush wasn't too thick. Littlejohn had advised Monroe to run a slow fire through the pines the next spring to kill the brush and get rid of some of the slash of the thinning operation. Such control type fires are not harmful to pines, which are more resistant to flames than their hardwood cousins.

The pine forest where the Bohannon Pulpwood Co. had thinned had the look of a fat man that had just loosened his belt. Now they had room to grow, and the sigh of relief was almost audible. Littlejohn was right. Looking at the forest, you could hardly miss a tree. They were still evenly spaced. The spaces were just a little wider. Forked, scarred and crooked trees were missing. It looked good. The forest was healthy and vigorous.

Monroe was pleased with the results.

The kudzu was a different proposition. True, he had made some headway, but it was still there in abundance, thriving and growing where the herbicide had missed it, and the cows had not been able to graze it. It was a constant sore spot with him. The task of eradicating it sometimes seemed hopeless.

As soon as Littlejohn gave the word, however, they were going to strike one more mighty blow before winter.

Fire. Enemy of the forest when uncontrolled, but this one was going to be carefully controlled and monitored. It would burn only what they wanted it to burn, kudzu and weeds. Then they would prepare the ground for the little loblollies that would be planted that winter. Next spring that wasted ground would have a different look.

"Run that line just along the edge of the trees, Billy!" John shouted to the tractor operator, who was plowing a fireline around the kudzu patch. "Take it to the bluff on both sides!"

"We can touch it off this afternoon, Mr. Pat," John said to Monroe.

"That frost did just what you said it would do," Monroe said. "It sure dried those kudzu leaves."

"It will burn now like nobody's business," John said. "We'll wait 'til the wind dies down this afternoon before we light it."

"You don't think it will get in the pines, do you?" Monroe asked, a little apprehensively.

"I don't think so," Littlejohn replied. "We will start it next to the pines and let it burn away from them down the slope. By the time it reaches the middle of the kudzu, it should be going like forty."

"You're not kidding," said the wizened little man, observing them from the security of the thicket. The big dog wagged his tail.

* * * * *

Word of the impending operation had gotten around, and several people were beginning to gather to observe the event. Among them, and conspicuously present, was Homer Greene.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," Homer said. "When you going to touch her off, John?" he asked excitedly.

The hot part of the day had passed, but Homer was still sweating.

"Soon as the wind dies down a little more," Littlejohn replied. "We need to keep those folks out of the way. Homer, why don't you go see if you can get them to stay back a little."

Homer ran off to tend to that task.

"That ought to keep him busy a while," Littlejohn said. "We'll be ready to set her off in a few minutes."

"I'll go tell Bessie," Monroe said. He found her setting out some lemonade, cookies and hot coffee for the neighbors who had gathered. "Won't be long", he said.

"All right. We'll be watching," she said. "Don't you go sticking your nose in it and get burned."

The sun was sinking lower before entering a long Piedmont twilight when Monroe got back to where Littlejohn was lighting his backfire torch. There was just a nip in the fall air, and the wind had died to a gentle drift, just right to disperse the smoke and keep the fire burning steadily in the direction they wanted.

Billy was standing by with the fireline tractor, and all was in readiness.

"Okay, here we go," John said, and began to walk along the fireline. The torch, pointed downward was dripping little balls of flame along the edge of the dried kudzu, leaving a trail of small flames which quickly grew as they caught up in the tender dry fuel.

John circled the entire patch, making a large semi-circle from the bluff on one side, all the way around the thicket, meeting the bluff again. It was perfect. The flames were burning toward each other. and away from the pines.

The first charge didn't go off until the fire had burned about a quarter of the way to the center of the thicket.

There was first a "fizzt", then a rocket took off through the vines describing a long arc through the twilight navy blue of the darkening sky. When it appeared the rocket was about to enter orbit, there was a spectacular burst of fireballs followed by an earth shaking "**BOOM!**" that rattled windows as far

away as Anderson. Before the startled onlookers could recover from the first shock wave, a second, then a third was on the way.

"Judas Priest!" shouted Homer. "What was that!"

His was merely the first voice in the pandemonium that followed. The crowd fell back to a safe distance and gaped at the spectacular display of fireworks. Nothing like it had been seen since the halcyon days of excitement following the announcement of secession nearly a century before.

Littlejohn coolly held his head and was quickly galvanized into action, "Billy, get the tractor in there and cut a line across that patch!"

Billy, too, held his head. "Are you crazy! I don't get no combat pay!" But he headed for the tractor anyway, and wisely got under it.

Monroe and Bessie, after the first shock had worn off, stood and gazed in wonder at the ongoing display of pyrotechnics.

Homer was speechless.

* * * * *

Over near Dabney's Crossroads, Bull Crenshaw, owner of the Crossroads Store and respected Chief of the Dabney's Crossroads Volunteer Fire Department, which stood strategically next to his house and store, was just sitting down to supper when the first loud report shook the table.

"Holy mackerel, Minnie! What was that!" he said to his wife who was frozen to the spot with a bowl of gravy in her hand.

When the second charge rattled the dishes on the shelf, Bull ran for the door and headed across the short way to the Fire House.

"Look out for my washin'! It's still on the line," Minnie yelled after him, but too late. Bull charged through the obstacle and emerged on the other side with a goodly portion of Minnie's lingerie clinging to various parts of his body.

To the south, the evening sky was aglow from the fire, and sparkling with the brilliant flashes, punctuated by the ear-splitting crash of the one way artillery duel that was taking place.

Reaching the Fire House just ahead of Roscoe Marnar, he immediately rang the alarm, and shouted for Roscoe to summon Joe Leonard and everyone else he could find. It was unnecessary, because the whole complement of the Dabney's Crossroads Volunteer Fire Department had volunteered and were either on hand or rapidly on their way.

In record time, which, considering the DCVFD held the record among their contemporaries, was **really** record time, the company had assembled, sorted themselves out, donned whatever of their fire-fighting gear they could find, and headed out the door, sirens wailing, lights flashing. Bull was driving, and had Minnie's unmentionables **still** clinging to him, strung out behind flying in the wind.

"Is it at the Home?" Joe yelled.

"No, it's on beyond that!" Bull yelled back, trying unsuccessfully to unwrap Minnie's brassiere from around his head. "looks like it might be the Patterson place."

"You think the Rooshans have invanded?" Joe shouted.

"Naw! They wouldn't of invanded Bearswamp! They'd a landed in Luthersville. It's the County Seat! Looks like it might be the Patterson place."

He finally managed to get half of Minnie's bra on top of his head, where it fitted nicely. The rest flapped in the wind behind, much like the coontail on the hats of Bull's pioneer forebears who, upon making it all the way to the foot of Stumphouse Mountain, decided if the Indians wanted the rest of it, they could have it.

* * * * *

Clutching a sheet to her that didn't begin to cover hams and thighs, Dolly Mae ran to what she thought was the closet door.

"It's Papa!" she shouted. "He's come to shoot you!" and out the door she ran, to reappear immediately, slamming the wrong door and heading for the right one.

Jim Ed sat straight up in bed, hair standing on end, spine tingling. Whatever the explosion was, it was perfectly timed to ruin a mood.

BOOM! came another one close behind the first.

Flicking out the bedside lamp, he made a dive under the bed. The cat, which had been stalking a mouse, gave the intruder a withering stare.

"Go away! Nobody home! We ain't here!" he shouted.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Three in succession, and Jim Ed, satisfied it wasn't Papa Reilley, or any of Dolly Mae's belligerent Irish brothers, began to wonder what was going on.

A muffled voice from the closet said, "If it is Papa, tell him we was a-doin' it for the Lord, like you told me, an' maybe he'll go away."

BOOM!

"Hush, child. That ain't your Pa," Jim Ed said, crawling out from under the bed. "Unless he's come after me with a cannon."

Jim Ed flicked the lamp back on, and said, "Come on out. It ain't your Pa."

The closet door cracked a bit and Dolly's wide-eyed flushed face peeked out. "Papa ain't got no cannon," she said, "but what in the world is goin' on?"

A bright flash and another dish-rattler let off. "Maybe it's the end of the world," she said. "If it is, let's get back in bed before Gabriel blows his horn."

Under ordinary circumstances, Jim Ed would have found that invitation too much to turn down. Jim Ed could nearly always handle most anything better than he could temptation. However, Dolly's remark gave him an idea. Maybe he could cash in on it.

"Get dressed! Hurry!" he said. "We gotta go!"

"But, if it ain't Papa," she said, still thinking about the bed, "whats the rush?"

"Come on!" he said, rushing out the door, still pulling on his pants and tucking in his shirt tail.

"I'm coming! Wait!" Dolly Mae cried. She managed to get her tight shift on backwards, but, since it was as low in back as it was in front, it didn't make much difference.

"Where are we goin?" she gasped, as they piled into the Rolls.

"To Judgment Day!" Jim Ed yelled as he started the powerful engine.

* * * * *

Back at the scene of the local Armageddon, quite a crowd was on hand. There were admiring gasps of OOOOHH! and AAAAAH! as the Aurora Borealis continued to mount over Bearswamp. A few reporters had gathered, their usual hardened nonchalance replaced by the same wonder and awe that was on everyone else's face. A radio crew was moving through the crowd, and there were some movie cameras recording the scene.

In fact, people for miles around had gathered on front porches, barn roofs, telephone poles, hill tops and road banks; anywhere that offered a good view of the fireworks. The front yard at the Home was full of inmates and aids, enjoying the spectacle.

"I ain't seen anything like this since William Jennings Bryan delivered his Gross of Cold speech at the Democrat Convention," Dendy chuckled.

"That's 'Cross of Gold', you ninny," Charlie said, "an' what do you remember about that?"

"I was in Chicago at the time, an' I heard him," Dendy retorted.

"There goes old Bull and the Fire Department!" Charlie shouted, as the fire engine went wailing by.

"What kind of hat was Bull wearing?" Dendy asked.

"Must be one of them new fire-proof fire hats," Charlie replied. "WHOOOEEEE! Look, there goes another one!" A few seconds later they felt the blast and heard the boom.

* * * * *

Grandma Bessies' coffee and cookies had long been exhausted by the time Jim Ed and Dolly arrived on the scene, but the deficit was being supplied by some enterprising souls who were hawking hot dogs to the crowd. Tiny was their best customer, and was getting some stares of wonder on his own, as he demolished hot dog after hot dog.

Jim Ed, seeing the size of the crowd, seized the opportunity, a thing he never let slip by, immediately raised his arms to the sky and thundered, "The Moment of Truth is COME!" **BOOM!!** "Good timing, J.E.," he congratulated himself. That boom was a good omen. He had never had a start like that.

Eyes began to shift to him, and he started the long warm-up that would climax with an appeal to render unto God all their worldly goods, which Jim Ed, himself, would be glad to take care of, and prepare to Meet Their Maker.

The DCVFD wailed up as Jim Ed was really swinging into motion. He had a good crowd now, and they were all casting doubtful looks at the sky after every resounding crash. It might not be the Judgment Day, but Jim Ed, not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, meant to take advantage of whatever came his way.

"Hook up the pumper, Roscoe!" Bull ordered. He meant to attack that fire, no matter what was in there.

"Lift up thine eyes and RINNGG the Bells in Heaven-ah!" Jim Ed exhorted his listeners.

"Hot dogs!" cried a vendor. Jim Ed's crowd took no heed.

"I'll take one!" Tiny yelled.

"You eat 'em faster'n he can make 'em. Give somebody else a chance!" someone shouted.

"Pressure up!" Roscoe shouted, and a stream of water shot from the hose just as Jim Ed reached the climax, jumped up on a table directly in the line of fire and shouted "GABRIEL BLOW YOUR HORN! WE ARE COMIN' HO-"

The water, under high pressure, never got to the fire. It hit Jim Ed square in the brisket, stripping white linen jacket, vest and gold watch fob, including gold chain and diamond encrusted elk's tooth, away.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! It was the climax of the display. After that, they began to tail off, and the crowd drifted away.

"I shoulda stayed in bed," said a sappy Rev James Edward Fuzzel.

Talk about ruining a mood.

* * * * *

Monroe, Homer and Littlejohn were sifting through the ashes of what was formerly a lush thriving kudzu thicket, now reduced to a few smoldering hot spots.

"Looks like we got it, Mr. Patterson," Littlejohn said.

"It doesn't look like it did before the fire," Monroe said.

"Look at all the places those charges left."

Evidence of where the rockets were placed were not difficult to spot. The field was pock-marked with large sooty circles; some with shallow holes blown into the ground when the rockets took off.

"Who do you suppose did that?" John asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Monroe responded. "This wasn't any kind of battlefield during the War Between the States, was it?"

"I don't think so. Never heard of any battles around here," John said. "But there was sure one last night," he added.

"Here come the Bohannon boys," Homer said, pointing to Old Woco pulling into the yard.

The boys piled out, and Ma Bohannon went in the

house to help Miss Bessie clean up. Last night's visitors had left quite a mess. The boys came out and joined the men looking over the burn.

"Boy! That was some show!" Otis said. "We heard it clean over at Polly's. Soon as I saw the fireworks, I knew where it was."

"They didn't even have anything like this at the Fair!" Tiny said.

"We couldn't even see it anyway, inside that darn cowsuit," Rooster said.

Homer, who was out on the burn looking for clues to the mystery, suddenly called out, "Look, you can see where these tunnels ran." He pointed, "You can see traces of them all over the place."

It was true. The paths had been worn down to mineral earth and were plainly visible to the eye. Following them out, they seemed to be converging in one area.

"Whatever made them had a den over there somewhere," Otis said. "Let's follow one and see where it leads."

It led to the bluff, which was still covered by heavy mats of vines that the fire didn't get.

"The fire stopped right here at the edge of the bluff," Homer said.

"It's a darn good thing it did. You liked to have burned me out," came a voice from the kudzu.

"Good God! It's hainted!" Homer yelled, slamming into Tiny in his haste to get away. He bounced back up immediately and succeeded in falling back another twenty feet, where he stood rooted to the spot, gaping.

There was a rustling in the vines and suddenly a cow's head poked through. It had large eyes, long eye-lashes, a coy grin and a large daisy twined in its horns.

"It's Gertrude!" the three Bohannon boys sang out together.

Monroe, Littlejohn, Odis, Rooster and Tiny stood in dumbfounded silence as the figure of a small barefooted man wearing a cow's head stepped toward them out of the vines.

"I'm, I'm, I'm d-d-dumbed," Homer said, still rooted to the spot.

As the six stood gaping in silence, the small figure removed Gertrude's still smiling head, revealing a greyish grizzled figure, which, far from threatening, was smiling at them.

"Monroe Patterson, I presume," the figure spoke, "Don't you know me?"

"I-I, er-I don't believe I've had the pleasure," said Monroe, ever the gentleman. Being of the old school, he didn't like being caught off guard in social situations.

"Tallmadge Hamm," he said, advancing toward Monroe, hand outstretched.

"Tidge Hamm! I don't believe it! We heard you were dead," he said, warmly grasping the offered hand.

"Not yet," Tidge said, "but not because you fellers didn't try to burn me out.

"But you've been missing so long! How- Where, I mean, what's," Monroe stammered, trying to get out all the questions at once.

The others were standing around, unable to take in all that was happening before them.

"Yep. Been out here going on twenty years, I'd say."

"That's the Lepper-coon I near 'bout landed on!" Tiny said, finding his voice at last. Turning to Rooster, he said, "I **told** you there was a little green man, but you wouldn't believe me!"

"What about the dog?" Rooster said, looking around.

"You watch your language, young feller," he said to Tiny, "I'm not a 'Lepper-coon', or any other kind of coon. And you liked to squashed me that day you came crashing through the kudzu!"

Tiny nodded, but he was unwilling to give up a thing he had come to accept as truth; not even with such convincing evidence.

"What about that big dog?" Rooster repeated.

"He's right here," Tidge said. "Come here, Sam."

A rustling in the bush, and the big black Lab stepped out and came over to Tidge.

"Does he bite?" Rooster asked.

" 'Spec he would, if I told him," Tidge said, "but I don't see anyone around here that needs biting. Do you? Go over and shake hands with Rooster, Sam."

The big dog went over to Rooster and stuck out a large rough paw, which Rooster accepted and shook.

"He knows my name," Rooster said wonderingly.

"Sure he does," Tidge chuckled. "We know all of you. We've been watching you for nearly six months. You like to broke us up a time or two, but I thought I was a goner for sure when Tiny dropped in on me unexpected." Tiny shuddered at the memory.

"But where-" Monroe began.

"Why don't you all come into my place, and I'll tell you all about it," Tidge said.

"I still think he's a Lepper-coon," Tiny whispered to Rooster.

Sam came over and licked Tiny's hand, and poked out a paw.

"He wants another one of your collard green and egg san'wiches," Rooster said. "Poor dog."

Sam wagged.



TIDGE'S TALE

Tidge led them single file through the tunnel in the vines, Homer and Tiny bringing up the rear, to the entrance of the cavern. Standing aside, he gracefully motioned them inside, where, once again, they gaped in wonder. Gaping in wonder was a thing they were beginning to expect to do as a matter of course. It was a cave, right enough, but what they found inside was not what they expected.

"It-it-er-ah-it doesn't look like it did when I played here as a boy," Monroe said. Indeed, it didn't.

"It isn't much," Tidge said, but it's been home nearly twenty years, and I've had plenty of time to fix it up a little."

The cavern was roomy; plenty big enough to comfortably accommodate the seven men who had entered. It was illuminated by sconces along the walls burning beeswax candles reflected from sheets of mica placed behind the candles. A small chandelier, raised and lowered by a rope and pully, hung from the ceiling, light from its beeswax candles dancing from the reflection of a hundred clear quartz crystals, making up the chandelier.

In the far reaches, where the room became a narrow passage leading further back into the bluff, stood a large cistern receiving the pure clear waters from the spring whose flow had carved the cavern over eons of time. The spring served as a refrigerator. From the bottom of the stone cistern pipes emerged, supplying water for the sink, the still, which was bubbling away, a commode hidden in a private corner, and a hot water heating system that was piped along the walls and beneath the floor. The floor, itself, was tiled with smooth flat stones imbedded in the compacted earth of the cave's original

floor. Waste was piped to a septic tank buried at the foot of the bluff, thence to the creek.

When some early Patterson attempted to dig a well, he managed to sink a shaft directly into the cavern, thus creating an airshaft which drew the cool air from the farthest depths, ventilating the room occupied later by Tidge. It had also served as the entrance for Gertrude. There was no written record of what the early discoverer of the cavern thought about it. Certainly he dug his well elsewhere.

On the stone ledge of the "kitchen" was a three burner stove and an oven fashioned from a square ten gallon can. All were powered by alcohol burners. There was a kiln where Tidge fired pottery, some of it glazed and painted, for his domestic uses and storage. Jars of preserves lined one shelf, and there were several dimijohns of distilled spirits for medicinal and other purposes, as well as for furnishing heat. There was a rack of bottles filled with what must assuredly be wines of different hues. Baskets of white oak splits held drying herbs and wild greens, and all sorts of dried apples, onions and usable roots from the forest were hung on strings of kudzu vine.

The furnishings were simple, sturdy, utilitarian and ample. Benches were split logs resting on peg legs. The big table was of rough hewn walnut boards, polished smooth by use of fine creek sand. Two beds occupied the "bedroom corner". One large round mattress on the floor served Sam, who lay on it now with a curious but contented eye on the visitors. The other was off the ground on an oak frame. Rope springs of kudzu vine interwoven with grapevines gave added comfort. Both mattresses were stuffed with down feathers from hen houses and barnyards raided by Tidge over the years. Very few people missed a chicken now and then, and none missed the feathers.

"N-nice place you have here," Homer found his voice.

"Just 'cause I'm a hermit doesn't mean I have to live like a Neanderthal," Tidge said.

Tiny didn't know the Neanderthals. He thought they must be some poor family up on the mountain, but he did think Lepper-coons lived pretty well.

Tidge served them all apple brandy in glasses he had collected over the years. It was of a proof that got the whole gang relaxed and ready to listen to the tale he was about to spin.

Tidge took a long sip of the firey applejack to clear his throat, and began:

"You all will have to pardon me if my throat gets dry from time to time. I haven't done much talking for the past twenty years."

"Go right ahead at your own pace, Tidge. We'll listen," Monroe said.

"Well, I guess you all know that there was quite a scandal when I turned up missing at the same time a large quantity of cash disappeared."

Everyone nodded.

"In case you are wondering, I'll tell from the start I didn't take any money."

"Then who did?" Homer asked.

"Hush, Homer," John said. "He'll tell us, if you don't interrupt him every five seconds."

Homer subsided.

"Monroe, as you know, I was always shy as a boy in school, and didn't date any of the girls, much."

"I know you always enjoyed watching everyone else having fun," Monroe said.

"Yes. I was a watcher, not a joiner. I remember I always liked you in school because you were always considerate, and didn't poke fun at me for not joining in," Tidge said. Monroe smiled at the memory.

"Well, you know my folks were well off, and sent me to Clemson when we got out of high school. I didn't care for all the military stuff, but I enjoyed most being in the chemistry lab. That's what I majored in, Chemical Engineering; but I never did get to do any of it, because my folks wanted me to go in with Hamilton in the mortgage business. That's how I got to be Treasurer of the company.

"Everything went pretty well. I didn't really enjoy it as much as I would have liked chemical engineering, but it wasn't bad, and, as Treasurer, I didn't have to get out and mingle too much."

He paused and drained his glass of brandy. The others did likewise.

"Pour us all another round, Homer," he said, holding out the empty glass. Homer jumped to his feet and quickly obliged.

Continuing, Tidge said, "As I said, everything went well, until Mr. Penrose sold out to Ogden Hildebrandt, and retired. Penrose was Ogden's uncle; so there wasn't much trouble for Ogden to engineer that deal, you know.

"Anyway, after Ogden joined the firm, little things began to happen."

"Like what?" Monroe prompted.

"Well, small sums would turn up missing, and no one could explain it. I don't think anyone suspicioned me, but I was the Treasurer, and I didn't like what was happening.

"Then there were other things, too. For instance, if Ogden saw what he thought was a valuable piece of property we held the mortgage on, he would urge us to foreclose, and he would try to buy it in."

"Did he ever succeed?" Monroe asked.

"Well, he never succeeded in getting us to foreclose as long as there was any chance the owner could come up with the money some time, some way. We always went as far as we could with people who were trying, but there were times we

had no other choice, and Ogden would somehow manage to get some of his friends to bid in a piece of property for him cheap. He tried to hide it from us, but we would find out easy enough."

"Do you remember when my Pa paid off our mortgage?" Otis asked.

"Oh yes. Very well. That was about the time I left," Tidge said.

The Bohannons all nodded, knowingly.

"Why did you leave, Mr. Hamm?" Homer asked, once again on the edge of his seat. John didn't comment this time.

"I did a very foolish thing," Tidge said, "Ogden came in one day with a large sum of money he had just collected on a piece of industrial property. I think it was the largest sum we had ever collected in cash. He had it in a little satchel.

He put the satchel down, counted out the money, which was in large bills, and asked me to give him a receipt, which I did, as was my duty. Then he put the money back in the satchel and went in the back room to put it in the safe, he said.

I thought no more about it, and he went out a little later. He must have hidden the satchel under the overcoat on his arm. That was on a Monday or a Tuesday. I didn't check the contents of the safe until Fridays, but on Thursday I got a personal letter from the president of the bank in Greenville, thanking me for opening an account and entrusting his bank with so large a sum!

I was stunned, but I quickly put two and two together.

Ogden, of course had taken the money and opened the account in my name. The signature was a forgery, of course, but must have been a pretty good one, because, when I faced him with it, he merely pulled out the receipt I had signed showing he had turned the money over to me, and the account in Greenville was in my name with my signature.

Of course, the bank over there didn't know me, but Ogden could withdraw the money whenever he wanted. He

was banking on my not wanting to stir up a mess, and he had some pretty good documentation that I had gotten the money.

I was in a panic. He was right. I didn't want any kind of mess like that. I was getting tired of the whole world and things I couldn't control. On Friday, I left."

There was a silence while it all soaked in. A life spent in self-imposed isolation because of someone else's venal aspirations.

The silence was broken when Monroe softly asked, "How did you end up here?"

Tidge smiled, and took another sip of brandy. "Do you remember when we had the class picnic down here, Monroe? You and Bessie were courting pretty heavy then, weren't you?"

Monroe smiled in fond memory.

"I wandered off down here and found the cave then," Tidge said. "I thought at that time, it would be an awful nice private place to come." He smiled and nodded to himself. "It sure has been private, all right."

There was another pause while everyone took another sip of brandy.

"There are probably some other things I should tell you," Tidge said. This is a little embarrassing, but I'll tell you anyway. I am a thief."

The others looked up questioningly. Was he about to reveal a shocker they didn't know about?

"I'm afraid I'm the one that has been stealing your tools."

"How about my lunches, did you take them, too?" Tiny asked.

"Guilty," Tidge said. "I did leave you a pretty good meal every time. I only took a couple of sandwiches each time. You must have had most of a loaf of bread in there."

"I been nearly starvin'," Tiny said, somewhat aggrieved.

"I only took them for Sam," Tidge said. "He enjoyed most of them, but even Sam couldn't handle a boiled okra and

molasses combo," he chuckled. "He buried it. I'll show you where it is, if you like."

"No. If it's for Sam, I'll share with him," Tiny said, scratching Sam's head.

"I suppose you got those herbicide pellets, too?" Monroe said.

"Yes, they are back in the store room, if you want them. I was afraid you were going to kill every green thing on the place," Tidge said with a twinkle.

"No. You keep 'em," Monroe said. "Just don't feed them to the goats."

"How did you rig that little surprise last night?" John asked.

"I'm a chemical engineer," Tidge said. "Charcoal isn't hard to make, and I 'borrowed' a couple of bags of sodium nitrate from your barn, Monroe. There's plenty of bat guano in the cave, and that comes in handy for making explosives, sometimes. The county might be missing a few sticks of dynamite, too. I told you I'm a thief."

"We won't tell, if you won't tell," Homer said. "People will be talking about that show for a long time."

"I only did it hoping it would scare everyone off," Tidge said. "Of course, it didn't. Drew quite a crowd, actually. Guess I overdid it."

"I'd say that was an understatement," Monroe said.

"Get right down to it, I knew I'd get caught up with sooner or later. But this is my home. It's where I have spent twenty happy years. 'Course it did get lonely from time to time until old Sam here came along.

"I knew it was just a matter of time, though, and that's why I came to you today. I thought I would get in just one more lick with the cow costume," he chuckled. "Worked pretty good."

"One other thing," Homer said. "What about those tunnels?"

"I made 'em," Tidge said. "They let me get around without being seen. I could go to the barn, the berry patch, the garden; lots of places without worrying about someone sneaking up on me from behind. When Tiny crashed down on top of me I was watching you all trying to steal Brandt's apples. While you were running from that bull, I took your axe."

"Old Fred like to have caught us," Rooster said.

"Yes. And Tiny nearly caught me," Tidge replied.

"I guess it was a close call all the way around," Homer said, "at least for everybody but old Fred."

"I'd like to know what you thought when Gertrude came crashin' down your air shaft," Odis said.

"I didn't know what to think at first. I'd never had company drop in before, and I sure wasn't expecting anyone."

"Must have been a shock," Homer said. "I hate it when company just drops in on me, especially when I'm unprepared. You never know what to say to them, an' they might catch you standing around in your underwear, and where did that cow's head come from, anyway. I've never-

"Homer, why don't you let Mr. Hamm get in a word edgewise?" John said.

"I was only-, Okay, I guess you're right. He hasn't spoken in twenty years-"

"And you haven't stopped," John finished.

"Actually, that isn't entirely true," Tidge said. "I speak to Sam all the time, and he has a way of answering."

Sam wagged his tail.

"See," Tidge said. "And I overhear a lot of conversations, too. I just don't join in." He looked at Odis. "For instance, who are 'Hank' and 'Ashby'? I overheard you talking with them yesterday, not long before Gertrude came to call."

Otis scratched his head a time or two, before answering. "Did you overhear the whole story?"

"All six times that Hank had Ashby repeat it."

Odis turned to the others and said, "What Mr. Hamm is talkin' about won't bear repeatin, so please just remember that."

All heads nodded.

"Hank and Ashby are a couple of old friends, at least Hank is. We did some tradin' a few years ago. I ran into them when we went to the Fair, and they agreed to come help me out with a problem I was having."

"They helped me, too. More than they know," Tidge said.

Otis reflected a moment, then said, "Yes, I guess they did."

Turning to the others, Odis said, "I'll explain later."

"I think we already know everything but the details," Monroe said. "We'll wait for them, if we ever need to know."

"I want to invite them and you all with your wives to dinner tomorrow night. Maybe they would like to see how a hermit lives," he smiled.

Tiny didn't hear those remarks, although he did stir a little at the mention of the word, "dinner". He had taken one too many sips of applejack, and was curled up on Sam's mattress dreaming of Lepper-coons; one arm around Sam, who had his big head resting on Tiny's stomach. Both were snoring.



TIDGE ENTERTAINS

"You mean he's lived in that kudzu patch for twenty years?" Bessie was incredulous.

"That's right," Monroe replied, and you wouldn't believe what he has done to it."

"Talmadge Hamm living here all this time, and people thought he was dead. How did he look?"

"Looked a little green around the gills, I'd say," Monroe replied. "But he was a long way from starved out."

"And he wants us all to come for supper tomorrow night?"

"That's what he said. He wants us to come dressed up semi-formal," Monroe said. "That means get out my dark suit and press me a white shirt."

"Dress up for a dinner in a cave," Bessie shook her head.

"He says it's a sort of farewell dinner, since he's decided to move out and join the world again."

"And there is room in there for all of us?" she asked.

"There's room in that cave for the Rotary Club, if they want to come," Monroe replied. "He did ask us to bring some wine glasses. He's a little short."

"Wine glasses!" She exclaimed. "He must be planning a State Dinner."

"You have to remember, he hasn't entertained in quite a while."

"Who will be there?" she asked.

Monroe began to count off on his fingers, "The Bohannons, the Littlejohns, the Greenes, the Crakers, Hank Head and Setton Ashby. That's sixteen, counting us and Tidge."

"Mercy! He would have been better off with the Rotary Club," she said. "How is he going to feed that many? Are you sure I don't need to fix a dish?"

"No. He just said to bring wine glasses."

* * * * *

"Is he married?" she asked.

"I don't think so, Ma," Otis replied. "He was a bachelor when he went in that cave, an' I'm pretty sure ain't no widow women been knockin' his door down.

"Pity," she said. "What a waste of a good man."

"I think there was a widow woman 'bout like you tryin' to waste him was the reason he went there, in the first place."

"You get out of here, you scamp!" she raised her broom at him as he disappeared out the door.

She sat down on the bench at the table and fanned herself a bit, and mused about what the morrow might bring. Keeping house for her brood was hot work.

"Not married, huh," she thought. She remembered Tidge from the old days. He was a little man, just like Abner, except he didn't have Abner's ornery ways.

"Maybe I'd better iron the wrinkles out of my old red velvet," she thought. "I'll darn my crocheted shawl, too. It might be cold in that cave."

"Not married, huh," she thought as she went to get her best frock out of the mothballs.

* * * * *

"Oh, John, the poor man, and you nearly burned him out of house and home," said Grace Littlejohn.

"We didn't know he was in there," John replied. "Besides, he paid us back pretty good."

"Served you right," she said. "Now, after all that he's invited us to supper."

"That's what he said. And wear your best bib and tucker. Do I still have a tie?"

"Somewhere, and if we can't find it, we'll buy one. How many will there be there?"

"Sixteen, counting us."

"How **is** he going to feed us?" she asked.

"All I know is that he assured us he could do it, and for the women-folks not to worry about anything. He would take care of everything."

"He just as well have invited the Lions Club," she said. "On second thought," she added, gauging her husband's girth, "with you and Tiny Bohannon there, he'd just as well invited the Navy."

* * * * *

"We are going to eat **where**" Agnes Greene exclaimed.

"In Tidge's cave, dear," Homer Greene was trying to explain.

"I'm supposed to put on my best Sunday dress to go eat in a cave?" she said, totally unconvinced. "Homer, dear, we will get you an appointment with Dr. Crowley in the morning." She felt his head for a fever.

"I'm **not** sick! And I **don't** need Dr. Crowley!" Homer exclaimed. "I'm telling you, this was the sweetest little guy you have ever seen, and he has invited us to dinner."

"What does he look like?" she asked skeptically.

"Well, sort of like a small green wart-hog with lots of whiskers," he said, "but he said he would shave!"

"Wart-hog with green whiskers! That settles it. You've been drinking! Oh, Homer. You've **never** done that before!" She began to cry.

Homer could see things were beginning to slide downhill fast, but he couldn't do anything but keep trying.

"Now, now, Dear," he said, embracing her, "I haven't been drinking...except maybe a little of Tidge's apple brandy..."

"I knew it!" she exclaimed, "You **have** been drinking!"

Strangely, that seemed to calm her down, if not pacify her entirely. Now she knew why her husband had come home

talking out of his head. Well, at least she had stopped crying, and was looking at Homer, waiting to hear what else he would say.

Taking advantage of the lull and the obvious fact that Agnes was waiting for him to talk, Homer took advantage of that to see if he could improve the situation.

"Perhaps, Dear, I had better begin at the beginning..."

"Perhaps you should," she said, composing herself for a long story. She knew how speechless Homer could be.

However, on this occasion, Homer did himself proud; and continued without pause until he had covered the whole story from beginning to end, sparing no details he thought would add credence to the tale.

Agnes, for her part listened without interruption; even the parts that took on the sound of a fairy tale, which, of course, was a goodly part of it. However, in the end, she decided that Homer was incapable of conjuring up such a yarn, and grudgingly began to believe him.

"...and that's it," he finished.

"And that's all?" she said.

"Up to now, I guess," Homer said. "Tidge is leaving the cave, but he doesn't know where he is going from there. This dinner is a sort of farewell party, and he insisted on it."

"The poor man," she said, getting up from the edge of the bed where she had been sitting. "Should I wear my pink, or my blue?" she asked.

"Pink," Homer said.

* * * * *

"I have eaten in a lot of strange places in my time," Setton Ashby was saying, "I've eaten in box cars and under 'em, while the train was goin' eighty miles an hour. I've et lizards with Mexican Indians, whale blubber with Eskimos, and camel with A-rabs, but I ain't never sat down to a formal meal with a cave-dwellin' hermit."

"Sounds like you need to write a book on 'Things I Have Et An' Places I Et 'Em'," Hank said. "An' Odis said for us to wear our flashiest stuff." Otis had actually said "Sunday suit", but Hank put a little different spin on it.

"I wonder why he invited us?" Ashby asked. "We've never met the gentleman."

"No tellin'," Hank replied, "Maybe he wants to buy that old Willys you took in for the Caddy. Now that was a smart piece of work."

"I doubt he's wantin' that Willy," Ashby said. "Maybe he's heard about your fame as a mule trader, an' just wants to see a jackass."

"In that case, he can take the two of us and have a team," Hank replied, then added, "You're right, we've never seen him, but, don't forget, he's seen us."

"In that case, it's an even greater marvel we were invited," Setton Ashby said.

* * * * *

"Our daughter can sure come up with some dillys," Paul Craker said to his wife. "But I never thought she would be getting us involved with a hermit; let alone dining with him in his cave."

"And he turns out to be Talmadge Hamm," Wanda said wonderingly. "Do you remember what a scandal it was when he disappeared?"

"Yes. It wasn't too long after we were married, was it?"

"I don't think everyone thought he took that money," Wanda said, "but it did look awfully suspicious, didn't it?"

"His story makes sense, though," Paul said.

"Do you think they will ever try to prove it?" Wanda asked.

"I imagine the statute of limitations has run out by now, and I doubt if Mr. Hamm wants to do anything about it, anyway, unless it's just to clear his name."

"You would think that would be enough. The Hamms were such a fine old family."

"That's right," Paul said. "When that plane crashed, I guess that was the last of any hope of the family carrying on. Hamilton Hamm never had any children."

"Otis said to dress up," Wanda said. "That means your dark suit."

"Wanda, it's just dinner in a cave; not a funeral."

"All the same, dark suit," Wanda said.

* * * * *

Of the crowd assembled at the Kudzu Cove Tree Farm that evening would not all have qualified as candidates for the Diamond Circle, but nevertheless, it was a credit to wifely prodding and the best efforts of local habadashers.

The women, at least were gorgeous; Ma Bohannon in her red velvet, white lace collar and beautiful white shawl, her iron grey hair in a curl and a bun and her frosty clear blue eyes, even had her sons gaping.

Of the men, Grace Littlejohn had found John's tie, and, although he never succeeded in getting his collar to stay buttoned, he looked pretty good in dim light.

Hank and Ashby appeared in bright red checked and candy striped jackets over white duck trousers. Straw boaters and two toned wing tipped cordovan shoes graced the ensemble at the extremities.

Tiny, however, took the honors for effort among men. He had bathed, shaved, and trimmed his hair, before donning a brand spanking new orange Clemson jersey and a new pair of jeans with enough material in them to have made a set of sails for the Cutty Sark. Even his cap was missing, which represented, not only a great sacrifice for him, but dire threats from his mother.

With Monroe in the lead and Rooster bringing up the rear, the entourage set out along the now well beaten path along the edge of the pine woods. From a distance, with nearly everyone holding a flashlight, their progress resembled that of a large glow worm seeking its cave, which they found.

Mr. Talmadge Hamm, acting as his own butler, for indeed the occasion called for one, greeted his guests at the entrance, and gracefully ushered them into his sanctum. Tidge was clad in high stiff collar, white tie and tails, all of which had obviously been in storage many years, but showed surprisingly little signs of mold and mildew, considering their having been stored in a cave. This was due, he explained later, to cedar shavings and frequent airings.

He, too, had bathed, trimmed his white beard to a Robert E. Lee style, and cut and combed his long white cornsilk-like hair. Although he had obviously not dressed down for the event, his feet were shod in soft doeskin slippers lined with rabbit fur. He had not worn shoes in many years.

The guests stepped into the large cavern softly lighted by the alcohol and animal fat flames flickering in earthenware sconces fixed to the wall all around the cave; their light reflected from square sheets of mica. Light from the quartz chandelier with its beeswax candles danced around the room. The large split walnut log table had been moved away from the wall. Seven beeswax tapers in carved wooden holders spaced evenly down the center of the table, burned steadily, scenting the air with the fragrance of wild honey.

The table cloth was of finely woven vine fibers, beaten to a pliability and bleached to a light green whiteness. Napery was of the same material. Placemats were of plaited pinestraw, and tableware consisted of finely carved walnut knives, forks and spoons, polished to a smooth finish with silty creek sand. Placecards on a stiff thin parchment told each guest where to sit.

Along the wall and parallel to the dinner table was the long work bench groaning under a mass of food. "Enough to feed the Lions Club **and** the Navy, Grace Littlejohn thought. Blue alcohol flames flickered under large metal containers, keep food hot.

Motioning the awe stricken assembly to be seated on the sturdy chairs and cushioned benches around the room, Tidge started them off with a melon liqueur slightly flavored with wintergreen, served from a large polished wooden tray in some of the small wine glasses Bessie had sent by way of Monroe that morning.

The aperitif had the effect of relaxing the hushed silence that had come over the crowd when they entered the room. Although they were still gazing in utter wonder at what they had not expected to encounter, conversation began to flow.

"Homer, you told me this was a moldy old cave," Agnes was the first to speak.

"I never said any such thing! I said-"

"This is wonderful, " Grace Littlejohn said, meaning the liqueur and everything else in the room. "How did-"

"It is all Nature's bounty, my dear," Tidge said. "I assure you I have not been to a grocery store in many years," he smiled and added, "although I might have visited a few local gardens from time to time."

His guests, having finished their drinks, Tidge collected the empty glasses on the large wooden tray, and announced, "Since my humble establishment seems to be running short of servants, I am afraid we will have to serve buffet style."

At this, Ma Bohannon got to her feet quickly and said, "You just let everyone be seated, and I'll help you serve."

"I would be delighted for your help, but-"

"No buts about it," Ma said firmly. "If Tiny gets first in line there may not be anything left for the others."

"A point well taken," Tidge admitted, and motioned his guests to the table.

After all were seated, the first course, a clear soup with bits of light and dark meat floating among small cuts of greenery, was ladled by Mrs. Bohannon into pottery bowls from a large earthen urn. It was surprisingly hearty and a little spicy.

"Never had no drink of water tasted that good," Tiny said.

All the bowls were empty when Ma collected them, and Tidge served the tossed salad. Among the greenery a botanist might have identified sorrel, purslane and watercress with sliced groundnuts and various chopped nuts and seeds. The dressing was oil and vinegar with a touch of wild garlic. There was cheese, sliced and ground, to garnish the salad or merely nibble.

Following a platter of golden brown catfish filets, and a quail casserole dish, Ma served the vegetables, consisting of Jerusalem artichokes, boiled groundnuts, wild asparagus, which Tidge had put in jars; and a stir-fry of mustard, dandelions, plantain, some other unidentifiable greens, and wild carrots. Tidge carved two smoked wild turkeys stuffed with hickory nut dressing, and two hams of roast venison served with mint jelly. Filling their own plates, Ma and Tidge sat down to join the others.

The guests drank wines of various hues, and had choices of rose hip tea or chicory coffee. There was a dark sweetish wine Tidge identified as mead, made from wild honey—the oldest fermented drink known to man.

As the wine flowed, conversation flourished above the din and clatter of wooden forks and wooden plates. As plates began to empty, Tidge got up, and he, with Ma's help, served the final course. Dessert. A great persimmon pudding topped with whipped cream filled with blueberries, blackberries, wild strawberries, chopped walnuts and hickory nuts.

That finished, while guests pushed their chairs back and conversation began to drift, Tidge excused himself once more. Disappearing down the narrow passage to the rear, he returned shortly bearing several heavy corked bottles dripping with cold spring water.

This time, with the aid of Hank, who declared himself an expert cork-popper, filled each of Miss Bessies' champagne

glasses with a sparkling pink wine and passed them to his guest.

Before he raised his glass in toast, he said, "We have a surprise guest who has been waiting in the wings to be introduced. Some of you may already know her, and others might have only heard about her, and still others might have doubted her existence, but here she is. Come on out!" he called.

At that, Sam came into the room pulling a coyly smiling Gertrude by a rope around her neck! Spotting Tiny, he dropped the rope and ran over to him. Labs can never get too much loving.

Gertrude was on a framework built on wheels, and her head was fixed so that it bobbed up and down when the frame moved.

"Since Gertrude more or less dropped in on me, I suppose she is mine to do with what I want," Tidge said. "Therefore, I hereby return her to her original owners whom it is reported might have used her in a worthy cause I heartily applaud."

"Hear, Hear!" from the crowd, amid applause.

"Well, what are we goin' to do with her, Hank?" Ashby asked.

Hank rose to the occasion remarkable.

"We hereby donate her, anonymously, of course, so the sheriff won't ask embarrassing questions, to the City Park where she will enjoy amusin' the kids." (There she stands to this day, to the amusement of children; the amazement of City officials, the embarrassment of Ogden Hildebrandt and astonishment of Sam Hundley.)

After the stir had died down a bit, Tidge, still standing, said, "I think some of you all are wondering what you have been eating."

There were nods of agreement all around.

"Whatever it was, was mighty satisfying," John said, "and a lot better than one of Tiny's san'wiches."

"Well, I will tell you it all came from the woods, the swamps, the fields and the creek, that have fed me well for twenty years. I grow my own mushrooms."

"We began with a clear soup. It was turtle, so there is no need to go home and count your chickens, Mrs. Bohannon. Then we had a salad of green things I had either gathered today or dried or canned when they were in season. The mixed vegetables had, among other things kudzu leaves, which I have found very nourishing if properly treated and prepared.

The cheese I make with the aid of the goats and cows around the neighborhood, and the bread was made with cattail pollen, which makes excellent flour. I also grow my own yeast.

"What were the little bitty seeds in the salad?" Homer asked.

"Chopped pine seed from Monroe's pine trees," Tidge answered.

"To think, I raised these boys on greens and fatback with all this around us," Ma said.

"If you can learn to shop where he does, you can sure save on our grocery bill," Otis said to Polly.

When it got quiet again, it was obvious Tidge had more things to say.

"As you all know, I've been observing the things that have been going on. I've watched Monroe working hard to reclaim what I regarded as my kudzu thicket for his tree farm, and I have watched the Bohannon boys labor hard for their pay.

I have overheard conversations, some of which I shall never reveal," he gave a meaningful glance toward Hank and Ashby, who nodded acknowledgment.

"I have observed and known you all longer than you have known me, and, if the world has people like you all in it, then the world is worth living in."

I guess the fireworks display the other night was my last shot at staying a hermit. I'm coming back to the world, if it will have me," and he raised his glass.

"We'll all drink to that," said Monroe, and they did.

"There is one other thing I think may be of interest to some of you," he said, and everyone cast him a questioning look. No one could imagine further surprises tonight. "Especially the Crakers, who have raised such a wonderful daughter; and Odis, who will soon claim her as his bride."

Otis, Polly, Paul and Wanda all looked at each other blankly.

"My little sister, Madge was a pretty girl, clever and smart, but she was spoiled rotten."

"But what's that got to do wi-" a sharp jab in the ribs silenced Homer.

"She had everything she wanted, including her pick of the young men in town, but she would have little to do with them.

Then a young traveling portrait artist came to town, and my folks made the sad mistake of engaging him to paint a portrait of Madge. Long before the portrait was finished, she had fallen madly in love with him.

You can imagine it didn't sit well with our parents, or any of us, for that matter. But she wouldn't listen, and when he finally left town, he left with her, and they were married over at Toccoa.

Some months later she returned home to have her baby secretly. Our parents assumed they would have the baby, a girl, to raise, but they underestimated my sister's love for her husband...and for her baby.

Knowing the kind of life they would lead was not what she would choose for her child, and not wishing to burden her aging parents, she carefully chose a fine couple who could not have children, and early one morning, left the baby on their doorstep and went to join her husband.

We never heard from them again, until one day we learned they had been killed in a plane crash in South America. The bodies were never recovered."

Turning to Polly, he said, "If you have a little pink angel shaped birthmark under your right shoulder blade, you are my niece."

"Uncle Tidge!" Polly cried, and with tears sparkling in her eyes ran to kiss him on the cheek.

Otis got up and shook hands with his uncle-in-law-to-be.



GOIN' COURTIN'

"Now, you boys better be on your best behavior tonight. Tidge is comin' to supper, and I won't tolerate any shenanigans." Ma was emphatic. "Tiny, you be sure and wash up."

"Aw, Ma. I washed up last night."

"Well it didn't last. You do it again, an' shave, too."

"This is serious," Rooster said to Otis.

"Sounds like it," he agreed.

"Want me to go pick him up, Ma?" Odis asked.

"No. He only has to come from Patterson's. I guess he knows the way. I **know** he knows how to find my hen house," she said.

"He move out of the cave yet?" Rooster asked.

"He moved today," Ma said. "He's goin' to room with the Pattersons until he can find his own place."

"I bet he's goin't to miss that cave," Tiny said, thinking of last night's meal. "He sure had it wallered out comfortable. I wouldn't mind livin' down there, myself."

"You're gonna be, if yu don't wash up and shave," she said.

"Why'd he move out so soon?" Otis asked.

"Said it was a matter of principle," Ma said. "He says, when you quit bein' a hermit, you gotta quit right then. Like stoppin' smokin'."

"I notice you ain't had a dip of snuff all day," Rooster said.

"Been thinkin' about quittin', anyway," Ma said. Now mind your own business and go wash up. He'll be here anytime. And when supper's over. You all do the dishes, **and stay out of the parlor**, you hear!"

"This **is** serious," Odis said on the way to the wash house.

When Tidge showed up on the porch an hour later, which was an hour earlier than he was expected, they found out how serious it was.

In his hand he held a bouquet of chrysanthemums.

* * * * *

Left hand on hip and the other in the air, Dolly Mae studied her right profile in the full length mirror. Arching one eye critically, she studied particularly the area around the middle. Then, reversing the procedure, studied the left profile. It was the same; getting a little puffy around the middle.

She threw the uniform dress over her head and squirmed into it. She was on duty regularly at the Home now, as a waitress in the dining room, where her mother, Mamie was the head cook.

The neat white stiffly starched apron that went with the uniform buttoned at the waist; a rather simple operation, until recently. She struggled to get it buttoned, and struggled in vain. The button simply would not reach the hole that was designed for it.

"Damn," she said under her breath. Yesterday, she had worn a girdle, and that helped with the button, but was not satisfactory, as far as being able to work with it on. She thought about the girdle again, then decided to move the button, instead.

Her fingers flew to the task; and as she worked, she thought. Dolly Mae was not merely aggravated, she was worried. Jim Ed, or the "Reverunt", as she called him, had moved not one step closer to the altar than he had been that night last spring on the rear seat of his Rolls, nor of any of the times since.

Biting off the thread, she smiled a little smile of confident determination. No one yet knew of the impending heir, or at least she had not confided in anyone, not even Mamie. All the

Reverunt needed was a little prodding, and she was sure he would see the wisdom of the Fate that had brought them together; a fate aided by Jim Ed's eagerness and Dolly's willingness.

"All he needs is a little nudge," Dolly said to herself.

"Hurry up, Dolly. We're gonna be late!" came the voice of her adoring older brother, Patrick, who worked at the Luthersville Foundry, shoving great lengths of steel onto conveyers.

That he was of a natural bellicose nature to begin with, had been brought to the attention of many, to their ultimate sorrow. That he was absolutely insane with regard to his little sister was about to be brought to the attention of the "Reverunt".

* * * * *

That was the first meal I have had in twenty years, that I didn't prepare myself," Tidge said, sinking back into the comfortable armchair in the parlor. "And I might add, the best."

"I might add that you're the first man I ever met that was a better cook than I am," Ma said.

"Oh, I would never say that, Mrs. Bohannon."

"Molly," she corrected.

"Molly," he said.

"All those years livin' on kudzu sort of gave you a green complexion," she said. "When Otis said you looked a little green around the gills, he wasn't kidding."

Indeed, there was a green cast to Tidge's features.

"Maybe I am part chameleon," Tidge said.

"Well, we'll see what regular folks cookin' and regular folks livin' can do," she said. "Not that green is such a bad color. It just don't match your eyes."

Tidge was plainly uncomfortable talking about his person. It didn't fit his self-effacing personality. Sensing this, Molly changed the subject slightly.

"What do you plan to do now?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I'm really at loose ends in a way. I can't go back to the cave, although Monroe says I am welcome to stay there as long as I want.

"Why don't you go back there," she asked. "It's sure as comfortable as any place I have ever been. More so than a lot of places I've lived."

"Mostly it's a matter of principle" he answered. "If I'm going to live in the world, I can't really live in a cave."

"I suppose that is true," she said.

"Then, too, if I lived there I wouldn't have any privacy. Every Tom, Dick and Harry in the Country would want to come by and visit the hermit and poke through the cave. Sam would be a nervous wreck, and so would I."

"That makes even more sense," she agreed.

"For the time being, I will stay with the Pattersons," he said. "They have invited me to stay as long as I wish, but I don't want to be an inconvenience."

"You do have to get accustomed to living with people again, though. You can't be expected to do that overnight," she said. "Did you miss being with people all those years?"

"Well, when I first left, remember, I was in a panic, and bitter, too. I didn't think I could trust people anymore."

"When it comes to Ogden Hildebrandt, you were mighty dadgum right!" Ma said.

"It was bitterness and panic that got me in the cave," Tidge said, "but it was mostly fear that kept me there. There were many times I did miss the comfort of family, even though I had about everything else I wanted."

"Except shoes," she said.

"Yes, shoes were a problem," he said, looking down at the new shoes just purchased that day.

"Kick 'em off, if you want to," Molly said, "Nobody's lookin'."

"I think I will," he said, kicking them off. "The ones I had on when I left wore out pretty quick, and by the time I learned to make them out of buckskin, my feet were so tough I really didn't need them. However, I do feel a little more civilized with them on."

Molly poured them a glass of dark wine from an old pressed glass decanter.

"Here," she said handing him a glass, "this ought to civilize you even more. It's not as good as yours, but it'll do, I reckon."

He took a sip and stifled a grimace. "I reckon it will," he said.

"What are you goin' to do about Hildebrandt?" she asked. "Seems like a sin to let a skunk like that get off scot free."

"I'm not sure he is getting off scot free," he said. "I've heard he has been making a pretty big fool of himself running around claiming he was robbed by a purple cow."

"You don't suppose anyone believes that trash, do you?" she asked.

"From what I've heard, he's made a laughing stock of himself," Tidge said, then asked, "You don't believe it, do you?"

" 'Course not," she laughed. "Gertrude is the only purple cow I know of, and she would never do a thing like that."

Each with tongue in cheek, he held her hand while they laughed. Molly's wine worked fast.

* * * * *

Reverend James Edward Fuzzel didn't become the Divinely Self Appointed Custodian of the Lord's Treasury by looking gift horses in the mouth. To do so would run counter to his most deeply held convictions, which stated that it was sinful to deny one's body anything good that is offered. In this case it was supper at the Reiley's.

He had a strong suspicion that Dolly Mae had engineered it; but he had not missed the fact that Mama Reiley also found a certain fascination in his sermons, in spite of the fact the family was Catholic. Perhaps his powers of persuasion were greater than he thought. No, that couldn't be. He had never underestimated his powers...nor denied himself pleasures.

He gave the young man who had delivered the invitation a shiny fifty-cent piece and sent him scurrying back to the Home with his note of acceptance, and turned back to planning his next radio sermon, which a Madison Avenue ad writer might have envied, if he were hawking "Love Thy Neighbor" Bible Bookmarks to be given **FREE** with every \$10 donation to PBC. The fortunate donor also got an 8 by 10 glossy signed by the Reverend.

How could it miss?

* * * * *

"I've washed so much the past week my ears hurt," Tiny said, scratching his head. "My hair even hurts."

"Might help some if you'd take your cap off when you wash your hair," Rooster commented.

"Why?" Tiny countered. "Won't do no good. Ma makes me wash my cap, too."

"How long you think this is goin' to go on, Otis," Rooster asked.

"Until she either gets Tidge, or he moves back to the cave," Odis said.

"You reckon there's anything we can do to speed things up?" Tiny asked, hopefully.

"If Ma's apple cobbler won't do it, nuthin' will," Otis said. "He ain't missed a night comin', an' she's done baked four this week. He ought to tumble soon, if he's ever goin' to."

"That's the good thing about it," Tiny grinned, rubbing his stomach, "we sure have been gettin' some good groceries."

"Is it worth all the washin'?" Rooster growled.

Tiny's expression changed. "I'm not too sure sometimes," he said.

* * * * *

"This came for you today," Monroe said, handing Tidge a vellum envelope richly embossed.

"For me?" Tidge looked questioningly.

"It came today in care of us," Bessie said. "You must be getting famous."

"It's from Welles, Graham, Darling, Sosbee and Huckleby," he said, opening the first mail he had received in twenty years. "My brother's attorney's."

Monroe and Bessie watched him open and read the letter. Their curiosity was greatly aroused as they watched his expression change as he read.

"Oh, this is awful!" he said.

"What is it?" Bessie said, alarmed.

"Read it," he said, handing her the letter.

She read it aloud:

Mr. Tallmadge Hamm

c/o Monroe Patterson

RFD

Luthersville, S.C.

Dear Mr. Hamm:

As executors of the estate of your late Brother, Hamilton Hamm, we hereby inform you that a diligent search has failed to turn up evidence of any other heirs.

Therefore, as his only living relative, the residue of his estate, after funeral expenses and outstanding debts have been paid, are to be turned over to you.

Please advise us as to your wishes.

Yours truly,

Alduous Huckleby

"I'm a wealthy man," Tidge said.

"Why is that so bad?" Monroe asked.

"Now I can't possibly ask the Widow Bohannon to marry me!" Tidge moaned.

* * * * *

Dinner at the Reileys' consisted of Dolly Mae glowing, Mamie chattering, Papa feeding his face, Paddy, as that was the name he went by, alternately glowering at Jim Ed, beaming at Dolly Mae and reaching for another chicken leg. Two younger brothers, twins aged nine, spent most of the meal fighting, but hardly anyone paid them the slightest attention.

Jim Ed spent most of the meal trying to ignore World War III, which seemed to have erupted beneath his feet. Once there was even the smell of something burning, which turned out to be his shoe that was set on fire by one of the brothers during an armistice in the war. This generated the only genuine smile Paddy cast in his direction all night. Otherwise, Paddy seemed to have missed entirely the wit and humor for which Hibernians are reknown.

Following the meal, of which Jim Ed got to share precious little, the boys scampered off to do whatever little boys do when they scamper off. Papa rose and declared that he and Paddy would be conversing with the Reverend in the parlor, while the ladies cleared the table. Motioning him to follow, Jim Ed obediently joined Papa and Paddy in the parlor.

To Jim Ed's surprise and relief, Paddy's attitude seemed to mellow a little out of sight of the women. Going to a sideboard, he took out a bottle of Old Bushmill's.

"Have a drink?" It sounded less like an invitation than on order. There was enough edge to alert Jim Ed to the fact that refusal might be taken personally.

Not wishing to commit a breach of etiquette that could easily prove fatal, he readily agreed. "Yes, thank you. I think I will," he said perhaps a little more heartily than he actually felt. "A little wine, you know...heh, heh"

"This ain't wine. It's pure Irish whiskey," Papa said,

raising his glass. "Here's to pure whiskey and pure women. May there never be a lack of either around this house."

"Er- Yes, indeed," Jim Ed agreed, draining his glass, as did Paddy and Papa.

"Have another?" Paddy asked in the same tone of voice as before.

"N-n-no thanks," Jim Ed stammered, still trying to clear his throat from the first one. A shake of the bottle on Paddy's part changed his mind.

"Well, if you insist," he said. "never can overdo a good thing, I always say."

Paddy poured. Papa raised his glass again. Paddy followed suit, and Jim Ed was finding it most difficult to please that boy, no matter what he did. But he resolved to keep trying.

"What'll we drink to?" he asked as genially as possible for Paddy's benefit.

"You like sheep?" Papa asked.

"Wha-"

"Sheep! You like 'em?" Papa said again.

"Like 'em?" Jim Ed couldn't imagine the purpose of that question, but, since it didn't have the ominous overtones of "pure women", he was glad of the change. "Sure," he said, "I love em. 'Bring me your lost sheep,' it says in th-"

"We know about that," Paddy said. "Let's drink to lost sheep. We got about a hundred back there in the pasture."

"Let's," Ed said raising his glass. "Here's to lost sheep."

He started to set his glass down, when Paddy, once again shook the bottle. The toasts weren't over.

"You like pure women?" Papa asked.

"Sure. I lov-, er-that is, Yes, indeed. The Bible says—It Says in there somewhe-"

"Says they're good things to have," Paddy helped.

"Why, yes," Jim Ed said, happy for once he had said something Paddy liked, although he had a vague thought that

he wished they would avoid the subject. "They're good things, all right. Durn good!"

"Let's drink to 'em, again," Paddy said.

"Letsh," Jim Ed said. That old Paddy boy might not be so bad after all, and they drank once more to "pure women".

"You think Dolly is a pure woman," Papa scowled.

"Oh yes," Jim Ed said quickly, "One of the purest I ever, er-uh-saw. Yes. Very pure. No doubt about it. Very pu-"

"You think she'd make somebody a good wife?" Paddy said, matching Papa's scowl and raising him one glower.

Jim Ed definitely didn't like the direction these toasts were taking. He liked "lost sheep" better, but he didn't have much choice.

"Oh yes. Some man will be most fortunate to land Dolly Mae. No doubt about that, heh, heh."

"Then let's drink to Dolly Mae landing a good man," Papa said.

"One she deserves," Paddy smiled.

"If there's one around here good enough, which I doubt," Jim Ed added to be safe.

"Now then," Jim Ed said, after that one; hoping to steer things in a safer direction, "how many sheepsh you shay you got out there?"

"'Bout a hundred," Paddy said.

"'Ow many of 'ems losht?"

"'Bout ninety-nine. I found one today," Paddy smiled.

"Don' you think we ought to drink to the rest of 'em what ain't been foun' yet?" Jim Ed was getting a little misty.

"Why not," Papa said, and Paddy poured.

When Mamie and Dolly tip toed into the room an hour or so later, two empty bottles and one with some still left, were sitting on the floor by Paddy. Papa was asleep on the couch. Jim Ed and Paddy were seated on the floor, leaning against each other, each had an arm over the other's shoulder.

The two women smiled knowingly at each other, turned out the lights and went to bed.

* * * * *

"Why will being wealthy keep you from asking Mrs. Bohannon to marry you?" Monroe asked.

"Because, then I will never know if she is attracted to me or the money," Tidge said.

"Haven't you two been hitting it off pretty well, so far?" Bessie asked.

"Oh yes. Very well."

"Then, don't you think she is attracted to you? She hasn't thought you were rich up to now, has she?" Monroe asked.

"No. Nothing like that has ever come up."

"Then, why don't you ask her to marry you before you tell her about the money?" he suggested.

"I never thought of that," Tidge said. "Do you think she would accept me, and then change her mind after she finds out about the money?"

Monroe scratched his head, but it was Bessie who answered. "I don't see why she would," she said, "but you will have to ask her first."

Tidge showed up that night with a bouquet of roses. Two dozen of them...Long-stemmed.

* * * * *

Jim Ed stirred. Bright moonlight shining through the window woke him up. His mouth tasted as if a Galapagos turtle had decided to deposit her eggs there. Lifting Paddy's heavy arm from his shoulder, he shook his head to clear it, and memories began to creep back in. He was hungry. In fact, he was starving. He also knew that survival indicated a discreet retreat. Papa's loud snores echoed by Paddy's raucus notes indicated the strong possibility of accomplishing just that, if he was careful.

He didn't have a car! Paddy had insisted on picking him up; an offer put in such a manner he had been unable to find words to refuse it. No matter. He could just grab his coat

and softly slip out the back door, out through the barnyard and the pasture to the highway beyond, and walk home. He would gladly hoof it, rather than face the Irish clan in the morning.

Slipping off his shoes, he struggled to his feet, which he found to be no easy task. Pausing a moment to get his bearings, he picked up his coat from the back of the chair and began to creep toward the kitchen door. Snore behind him told him all was well. That was when he stepped on the cat.

MEEEEOOORRRROWWW!! Jim Ed's hair stood on end, and he thought for a moment he was going to faint. He had never heard anything so unearthly! Catching his breath in shallow rapid gasps, he was sweating profusely and infinitely relieved when, after a pause, the snore continued.

Easing his way back out from a false start into the pantry, he identified the back door by the moonlight sifting through the curtain. He was half way across the kitchen to the door, when he rammed into Mamie's butcher block table in the middle of the floor, hitting his head against the big cooking pot that hung on a hook over it. The big pot, in turn swung against the smaller pots arranged on hooks next to it in descending order according to size. It was a kitchen carillon made to order, and chimed a racket calculated to awaken a hibernating grizzly; two of which were in the parlor.

Not daring to breathe, he stood frozen to the spot while the chimes reverberated to the heavens. An eternity later, the snore once again drifted from the parlor through the open kitchen door. Jim Ed heaved a deep sigh of relief.

This time, without mishap, he made it to the door and safely outside, pausing on the back steps to put his shoes on. He was nearly home free! Silently crossing the moonlit yard, he opened the barnyard gate which led into a high fenced corral. The only way out seemed to be thought a sort of narrowing chute and the head-gate beyond.

No problem, at least he thought so, until about halfway down the dark corridor of the chute, he stepped headfirst into

the dipping vat wherein sheep, goats, cattle and other livestock are gotten rid of ticks and various insects that feed upon their blood. It was most effective, for when Jim Ed came crawling out the other end, he was free of ticks, lice, and probably didn't have a flea on him, either. He was thoroughly cleansed, reeking of sheep dip, and more than a little chilled.

However, now he had only the head-gate to negotiate, and the rest was merely walking, which might have been made a little easier had he not left one alligator shoe at the bottom of the dipping vat.

Head-gates are arranged at the end of the chute, so that the animal just dipped ends up sticking his head through the gate, which is then slammed forward with a lever, holding the caught animal while someone shoots him full of antibiotics and may elect to perform minor surgery at their discretion.

Also, it might be noted that the logical manner in which a human might best negotiate his way through the head-gate is by going head first. This Jim Ed did, or was trying to do when the gate slammed shut!

"Well looka here, Dolly, it's the Preacher!" The voice was that of Paddy Reiley, but Jim Ed couldn't see him. In fact, he couldn't see anything but the ground. But, by raising his head as far as he could and lifting up his eyes, he perceived what might have been an angel in the white moonlight, had it not so closely resembled Dolly Mae. However, her face did have a sort of unearthly glow.

"Oh, look Papa! The Reverunt is on his knees! I do accept, Reverunt! This is so sudden, but you done won me! I'm yours!"

And that, dear friends, is how the Reverend James Edward Fuzzel, Divine Self Appointed Keeper of the Lord's Treasury, on his knees, with the aid of his future in-laws, and in the presence of God finally, not only Saw the Light, but discovered how the Irish dip, clip, and whip a sheep.

* * * * *

While it is agreed that the path of true love is not always smooth, and is often scarred by the heels of reluctant males, it leads inexorably to the altar. That being true, shortly after the episodes here related, Dolly, with Molly avowing that Tidge's inheritance was no obstacle, joined Polly on that path to the shrine of matrimony.



GET US TO THE CHURCH ON TIME

"I'll be glad when this weddin's over. So far, Tidge gettin' Ma to marry 'em ain't done a durn bit of good," Tiny complained.

"How you figure?" Rooster asked. "Ma ain't never looked better, an' old Tidge is tickled out of his gourd."

"I know, but I'm still havin' to wash every day!"

"You'll get used to it," Rooster said. "Besides, you smell better."

"Maybe so, but I ain't as comfortable," Tiny said. "Where's Otis?"

"Gone with those State fellers to take a drillin' on Hi Hat's farm."

"Think old Hi Hat's still sore at Odis about that deal?" Tiny asked.

"He ought not to be. He got twice what he would of took," Rooster said, "an' ruined the well in the bargain."

"He probably ain't lookin' at it quite like that," Tiny said. "Not much he can do now, though."

* * * * *

"Does Otis know everything we're plannin' now, Polly?" Molly asked.

"No, and it serves him right for not taking me to the Fair," Polly said. "He left it up to me, and he deserves what he's going to get."

"Still and all, it's a pretty big serving," Molly said.

"I'll admit, most weddings don't take place in a circus tent and have elephants as guests," Polly said, "but it will sure be remembered!"

"Nobody's like to forget it. That's for sure," Molly said.

"An' to think, I thought it was too much to suggest we make it a triple wedding, when Mamie Reiley asked me if they could use our decorations over at the church after our weddin'."

"That's when I started looking for a circus tent," Polly said. "With all those Reileys piling in, I knew it would be a circus, anyway, and old Hank came through. He said Professor Polloni was tickled to do it. He'll be on his way to his winter quarters, anyway."

"Mamie is so happy about gettin' Dolly Mae married off to Jim Ed Fuzzel, she's insisted on doin' all the cookin', an' if there's anybody in the country that can cook for a crowd, it's Mamie."

"Well, she's sure going to have a crowd to cook for," Polly said. "This guest list is beginning to look like the Federal Census for Keowee County."

"Why don't we just go ahead and invite the whole County?" Molly said. "The 'Keowee Crier' will be glad to print it."

"Why not," Polly said, "Let's do," putting the pen down and shoving aside the large stack of printed invitations.

* * * * *

"Odis Bohannon's done me for the last time!" the grizzled top-hatted figure said. "He's gotta pay, an' I ain't forgot Miss Snooty-puss that was too good to go out with me, neither."

"Just what do you have in mind, Hiatt?" Hildebrandt asked.

"I'm goin' to burn down that circus tent. That ought to put a stop to the weddin'," he said.

Ogden Hildebrandt studied for a minute. Ogden's jowls sagged and his clothes fitted loosely over the formerly corpulent frame. His normally ruddy complexion was rather sallow, now.

Thing had not gone well for Ogden of late. There was a Federal investigation going on with regard to his handling of

mortgage funds, and his business had virtually ground to a stop. His insistence that he was robbed by a purple cow had people casting sidewise glances at him, and conversation stopped when he entered a room. It was telling on him.

"Can it be done without being caught?" he asked.

"Piece of cake," Hi Hat said. "I got it all figured out."

It is a measure of how far Hildebrandt had come down in the world, that he listened and nodded while Hi Hat Hiatt outlined his plan.

* * * * *

The morning of the day before the wedding, a caravan of large trucks, emblazoned with signs proclaiming Professor Polloni's Premier Performing Pachyderms, raised a stupendous dust trail as it wound down the road to Bearswamp. Braking to a halt, the trucks lined up neatly side by side on the back side of the field that was once a kudzu thicket, and began unloading its cargo. Eight large beautifully groomed pachyderms walked ponderously down the ramps, followed by two pink yearlings close by their mother's side.

The crowd already beginning to gather, watched roustabouts unload two large rolls of canvas, and with the help of the elephants, a large red and white tent blossomed in the center of the field, and a smaller tent to serve as crew quarters and shelter for the animals grew behind the larger one.

The sign raised did not proclaim Professor Polloni's Pachyderms, but rather "POLLY, MOLLY AND DOLLY. OUR WEDDING BELLES".

"How nice!" Polly exclaimed.

"Thought of that one myself," Hank said.

"Did you get the hay?" Homer asked Monroe.

"A hundred and twenty bales of pure kudzu," Monroe answered.

"Kudzu?" the Professor, who had joined the group, said.

"Don't worry. They'll love it," Monroe assured him.

They did.

"Now there's what you needed," Homer said, watching the animals toss the hay into their mouths.

"Forget it, Homer. I'm sticking with cows," Monroe said.

"It was just an idea," Homer said.

* * * * *

The wedding that took place the following afternoon, two o'clock Christmas Eve, climaxed an Event the like of which had not been witnessed since the Cream of Keowee County Youth marched off with Orr's Rifles to do battle with the invader nearly ninety years before. But, perhaps that is getting ahead of our story.

"What does a 'Best Man' do, anyway?" Tiny asked, as Rooster was tugging at the stubborn cumberbund, trying to get it to meet in the back. "I thought the best man was the one gettin' hitched."

"He's supposed to stand still while I get this durn strap hitched," Rooster said. "Got it. Okay, let's see how you look."

"How do I look?" Tiny said, turning around so Rooster could admire him. "Pretty slick, huh?"

Rooster looked over his handiwork a bit dubiously. Other than the fact that the bottom of the stiff shirt didn't meet the top of the cumberbund, and the bottom of the cumberbund didn't meet the top of the trousers, it was a pretty good job.

"'Bout as good as you ever looked in your life," Rooster pronounced truthfully. "But, the cap will have to go."

"It's a bran new cap!" Tiny protested.

"I know," Rooster said, "but yellow just don't go with the rest of the outfit."

Tiny bowed to his older brother's wisdom, and doffed the cap.

"Now, how about," he said.

"Better," Rooster answered. "You shave today?"

"Naw. Just shaved yesterday. That oughtta do it."

"Nuthin' doin'. You go shave now, before we try tacklin' the tie," Rooster ordered. "I don't want to scratch my knuckles on your chin."

"Having trouble?" Tidge asked, entering room.

"Just tryin' to get Clark Gable here to go shave," Rooster said.

"I tol' 'im I just shaved yesterday," Tiny said. "Now he wants me to go do it again."

"Tiny," Tidge said, "I promise, if you go shave just this one more time you won't have to shave again until you want to."

"Promise?" Tiny said.

"Promise," Tidge answered, and Tiny scampered to find a razor.

"Tidge, that boy sure thinks the world of you," Rooster allowed.

"I think he still believes I'm a Lepper-coon," Tidge replied.

"Well, dont' tell him any different. You're the only one can get him to shave. Are we in a hurry?" Rooster asked.

"We've got about an hour. That's what I came to tell you," Tidge said.

"We might make it," Rooster said, picking up Tiny's bow tie to which several inches of extra material had been added.

* * * * *

The large red and white tent was full to overflowing with guests. The children had been given elephant rides, and Tidge's cave had been inspected from front to back by most of the crowd. Many, with a bootlegger's eye for concealment, envied the site, and marveled at the improvements Tidge had made turning it into a home. A few remained there to pull on a jug and talk about old times, while their wives attended the festivities in the tent.

Elder Whitson, resplendent in a new white silk suit, had taken his place at the altar; his wife sitting close behind to prompt him in case he forgot why he was there. Grooms in white silk swallow tail coats attended by their best men,

patiently awaited their intendeds to arrive. Tiny, with a broad grin dwarfed Tidge, who was standing as tall as possible. Monroe was standing behind Otis, who, counting on no more than a preacher and \$2, was still somewhat dazed by it all. Monroe knew a marriage made in Heaven when he saw it; and today he saw three, counting Dolly's, which some thought was made in a sheep pen. However, Monroe knew, too, that the Lord sometimes worked in mysterious ways.

Jim Ed stood, somewhat forlorn that this beautiful crowd should go unregaled about the rewards that awaited those who gave up their treasures for the Lord. Behind him, arms crossed, glowered Paddy Reiley, ready to grab him should he bolt for the exit; an unnecessary fear, as Jim Ed had long since resigned himself to the fate that awaited.

A broad red carpet had been spread over the bark and sawdust floor from the wide main entrance to the altar. Families had taken their places, and even the Reiley twins, for once, were subdued. The tent, heated by large space heaters, was warm. Some children slept.

The big steam calliope began the Wedding March, and into the tent strode the flower girl, Gertrude! From her side, where once protruded a shotgun, there now protruded an arm and hand strewing rose petals along the scarlet carpet.

From inside, muffled voices might be heard.

"Keep goin', Hank, don't stop to admire the crowd!"

"You just throw them flowers. I'll keep us aimed."

"Well, don't stop! I don't want to get stepped on by no elephant! That ain't in the contract."

"What contract? This is a freebie."

"Well, I sure don't want to get stepped on for nuthin'!"

As the Bridal Procession entered, Gertrude turned and sauntered out a side exit and harm's way, as planned, meeting, as she did, a roustabout that looked suspiciously like Ogden Hildebrandt. Upon seeing Gertrude, the roustabout stood frozen for a moment, then, setting his jaw squarely, stared

resolutely straight ahead and passed her by, as if she didn't exist.

Came the Bridal Procession. In single file, strode three of Professor Polloni's finest, each richly bejewelled and tasseled, led by turbaned mahouts with baggy silk trousers and gold slippers. Atop each in a little cupola-like car rode a bride; Polly first, in white lace, escorted by Paul, who seemed pleased and a little apprehensive at his first elephant ride. Next came Molly in a frosty feather-blue dress with lots of lace, accompanied by a dour Rooster, who had not forgotten his ill-fated ride on top of Old Woco.

Following them was Dolly in a pink silk dress that was as nearly white as it could be, and still be pink. Papa sat behind her, iron jawed and determined, shotgun in lap.

Approaching the waiting grooms, the parade stopped and the elephants knelt while their passengers, aided by ushers, disembarked. As the couples approached their stations, the elephants rose and departed. The Ceremony was about to begin.

Elder Whitson rose and approached the altar. Viewing the huge throng dimly through his thick lenses, he could see faces, but features were a little fuzzy. Mamie Reiley, her large face red with suppressed tears, could hold it no longer. A loud sob escaped in spite of her best efforts.

"Don't cry dear, it's a beautiful occasion," her sister, Maggie comforted.

"I know," Mamie sobbed. "It's so beautiful and I'm so happy. That's why I'm cryin'," She sobbed again and dabbed her eyes with a soggy linen. "I always cry at weddins. Ohhh! I'm so happy!" Mamie wailed.

Taking his cue from Mamie's blubbering, Elder Whitson began.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to say a few last words over the mortal remains of- . . ." he paused baffled, and turned to his wife. "Who're we buryin', Maude?"

"It's not a funeral. It's a weddin'," she hissed.

"Well, who'd marry a dead ma- . . . Oh a weddin'. That's better. I like weddin's."

"Then get on with it, you old fossil!" Maude hissed loud enough to be heard on the back row.

"Who we got here?" he hissed back.

"Polly, Molly and Dolly!" Maude shouted back.

"Well, why didn't you say so," he said.

Turning once again to the front, he said, "Polly, Molly and Dolly, do you take these three men- . . . Who are they marryin'?" he hissed.

"Otis, Talmadge and James Edward!" came the answer.

The Elder reflected a moment and decided if the wedding depended on his remembering all those names, it wouldn't get much further.

"Do you women take these men for your lawful husbands?"

"YES!" came a chorus.

"How 'bout you boys. You want these women?"

"YES!" came the answer.

"Hee, hee," said the Elder, "Now we're gettin' somewhere."

"Get on with it, you old turkey!" Maude prompted.

"Hush, Maude! I'm a-doin' fine."

Turning again to the assembled, he looked out on a sea of fuzzy faces. "Whose givin' these women away?"

"We are," chorused Paul, Rooster and Papa.

"Then do it!" the Elder directed.

It was done and the men sat down, relieved. Papa cradled his shotgun more comfortably, but didn't relax his vigil.

"Now then, you gents repeat after me. 'I take thee', whoever it is you're a-takin', 'for my awful- er-that is **lawful** wedded wife' . . .

At that point Dolly Mae, who might have been suspicioned of concealing a pumpkin under her bridal gown,

felt a wave of nausea, not unusual for a lass in her condition, and broke for a side door. A surprised Jim Ed, did a slow double take at Dolly throwing up just outside the open exit, then made a bolt for the opposite exit.

"There he goes! Catch him, Paddy!" Papa yelled, and a charge of bird shot whistled over the fleeing Jim Ed's head.

Paddy caught Jim Ed just outside the exit, bent over with a finger rammed down his throat.

"What in Sam Hill are you doin'!" Paddy roared as Papa caught up with them.

Jim Ed looked up with a startled questioning look. "I saw Dolly doin' it, an' I thought it was part of the ceremony, if you were Catholic. Honest!"

Quick thinking or plain ignorance, it saved Jim Ed's life, and the two Reileys escorted him back to the altar where a recovered Dolly was waiting.

Picking up where it left off, the ceremony continued. "Well, do you take 'em, or not!" the Elder thundered. He always managed to thunder at something whenever he found himself in charge of a service.

"WE DO!" The thunder rolled back upon him, and he flinched.

"How 'bout you women! Do you take these men? If you do, say their names, and, for cryin' out loud, TAKE 'EM!"

A babble of female voices calling names and saying, "I DO!" indicated that the ceremony was reaching its climax.

"Now then, do you all have rings?"

There was a scramble while Best Men and Brides Maids searched pockets for rings that were invariably in the other pocket.

They nodded when the rings were produced.

"Say something! I can't hear nods!"

"We got 'em!" Odis said.

"Then swap 'em out and put 'em on, be they for nose or finger, hee, hee." The Elder was pleased with himself for having come up with that line.

"Got 'em on?" He asked.

"We have them on," Polly assured him.

Then the words that twelve hundred people had assembled to hear spoken were about to be uttered. All strained forward.

"Then I say, and if I say it, it's official, YOU'RE ALL MARRIED and MAY GOD HAVE MERCY ON YOUR SOULS! Somebody come kiss these brides and give me a drink. I'm thirsty!"

A loud cheer rose from twelve hundred guests.

It was done!

* * * * *

Outside the tent, while the ceremony inside was proceeding, two seedy roustabouts were filling a large tank from which the elephants drank. No one would have noticed them as being different from any of the other workers, except they might have been more inept around the animals. Each was carrying a bucket in either hand from the water pump to the tank.

Jenny, the large cow elephant who liked to sit on barrels and barrel-shaped objects, was tethered near the tank consuming her ration of kudzu hay, before beginning the business of striking the tent and packing up. Sam and Jenny had become pretty good friends, and Sam lay at her feet watching the two men. There was something vaguely familiar to him about one of them.

Sam alerted and gave a low growl when, instead of emptying their buckets into the tank, the two men veered and splashed the contents of the two buckets against the rear of the tent wall.

One of them fumbled in his pockets searching for something.

"Matches! I used my last match tryin' to light this dumb cigar!" He whispered.

Sam was fully alert and on his feet.

"Fool!" said the fat man. "Here, use my lighter!"

From inside the tent, the voice of the Elder could be heard.

Hi Hat snatched the lighter.

Sam, sensing something badly amiss, was coming full tilt; silently and undetected by the two arsonists.

"Hurry!" said Hildebrandt. "We haven't got all day! Someone's coming!"

Hi Hat struck the lighter just as Hildebrandt turned, and out of the corner of his eye, saw Sam spring, cannonballing 105 pounds of muscle and fangs straight into Hi Hat, knocking him sprawling, and the flaming lighter in an arc that landed squarely against the kerosene soaked red and white fabric of the tent, which immediately flamed!

The two miscreants took to their heels with Sam hard after them.

Elephants are people who don't like fires, especially fires that could spread to a delicious bale of kudzu hay! When a smart elephant spots such a threat, a smart elephant will do something about it. Jenny was smart.

Stretching her trunk over and into the tank, the waters dropped several inches, as she loaded to capacity. Then aiming where she was looking, she directed a fierce jet of water straight at the flames; dousing them before they could spread.

Inside the tent, not ten feet from where this action was taking place, Bull Crenshaw was seated beside Minnie, who was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. She, too cried at weddings.

Suddenly, Bull alerted and sniffed. "I smell smoke," he whispered to Minnie.

"Hush, Bull. I can't hear what's goin' on," she whispered back, and resumed her crying.

At that moment, the jet of water struck the tent; some of it carrying through, dripped on Bull's shoulder. "If anything's

burnin', the rain will put it out," he thought, and got his mind back on the wedding.

* * * * *

The pair Sam was after ran down the lane that led to Farmer Brandt's pasture fence, which joined Monroe's. Not pausing to open the gate, Hi Hat and Ogden, inspired by Sam's near presence, cleared the fence and landed safely in Brandt's pasture, legging it up the hill toward the now bare apple tree. Sam held up at the gate.

Old Fred, ever alert, was not caught napping a second time.

* * * * *

Back at the scene of the festivities, hundreds of kisses having been bestowed upon blushing brides, and hundreds of congratulations given along with handshakes to sore handed grooms, it was time to strike the tents and head for winter quarters.

Professor Polloni, with a fat check in his pocket, slipped to him by a grateful Tidge, inspected the red and white canvas as it was being loaded. Noting a fairly large scorched spot, he inspected it.

"I wonder how that happened?" he said, scratching his head, and motioned for them to finish loading. Home was waiting.

* * * * *

Dolly and Jim Ed departed in the big Rolls Royce, and made it all the way to the Bridal Suite in the hotel in Greenville.

Slipping under the covers of the luxurious king size double, he embraced his rotund and rosy bride before flicking out the light.

"Not tonight," she said.

"What!" he said, flicking on the lamp again. "Why not? We're married!"

"Not until we get it sanctified by Father Murphy in the

morning," she said, turning her back and rolling over on her side away from him. "He promised to meet us first thing in the morning."

Heaving a sigh, Jim Ed again flicked out the light, and rolled over with his back to hers. He had just begun to snore and didn't hear her whisper softly, "Merry Christmas, Reverunt."

Father Murphy did meet them early . . . at the General Hosital, where he barely had time to sanctify the union before the somewhat premature birth of a small, but healthy baby.

"Dolly June," a worn, haggard, happy James Edward Fuzzel gazed wonderingly upon his nearly five pound daughter through the glass at the Maternity Ward. She gurgled back, happily, then started to cry. She was hungry.

For the first time, it began to dawn upon Jim Ed that all the Lord's Treasures weren't bankable.

* * * * *

Hank and Ashby drove Otis and Polly to the train station in a big limousine he had borrowed off his own lot. Things were picking up.

As they boarded the train and made their way to their compartment in the Pullman car, Polly asked for the first time, "Where are we going?"

"To New Orleans," Odis grinned broadly. "I knew I would surprise you one time."

"Oh, you did!" Polly squealed excitedly, and kissed him.

After the porter had settled them in their compartment, Polly thought she had better check in her purse to make certain the reservations she had made at Antoine's were still there.

* * * * *

Rooster had Old Bet hitched to the wagon, waiting out front of the Bohannon house. When Tidge and Molly came down the steps the sun was sinking in a red ball over the mountains. It was getting cool and the temperature was dropping fast.

He helped her onto the wagon seat and took the reins from Rooster. "Don't have far to go," he said. "Just to the cave."

Tiny and Rooster waved to them, as Old Bet slowly got underway. Sam trotted along side Old Bet.

"I'm glad we decided to go there," she said.

"Yes. It's a perfect place, and it will be a lot better with you there, dear," he said. She slid closer to him.

There was a pause, and the wagon with its two occupants were silhouetted for a moment against the light sky just before it began to darken.

"Molly," he said softly, "What are we going to do with all that money?"

"Oh, we'll manage somehow," she said, putting her head on his shoulder.

"I'm sure we will," he said, slipping his arm around her waist.

* * * * *

That night, while an unwashed Tiny slept with visions of sugarplums interspersed with ice cream topped with a mustard sauce danced in his head, it turned bitterly cold, and a light dusting of snow coated the landscape by the time it cleared and a full moon shone.

Some wag started a rumor later that Santa Clause was a little late getting to Luthersville, because it smelled so bad over Brandt's pasture, he had to detour. Not even Rudolf could handle that.

The two figures, huddling together for warmth in the stumphole they were sharing with a family of polecats, might well have believed the tale. The indignant polecats had expended their entire supply of ammunition in defense of their home before deciding to accept the visitors.

One of the intruders, the fat one stirred, and peering out at the huge bulk of Fred, bathed in the moonlight, said, "I've got to find another line of work."

That is where Sam Hundley found them the next morning when he served the warrant. Sam wasn't too happy about being called out on Christmas Day to arrest a couple of felons; and he was even less happy about having to drive back to Luthersville with the windows down.

Ogden and Hi Hat did find another line of work . . . making license tags for the state.

FINIS



EPILOGUE

Monroe was standing by the feeding trough with Littlejohn and Homer when Otis drove up. They were watching the cows feed on the hay Monroe had tossed them. It was early spring. The area that had once been covered with kudzu had been planted in little genetically improved loblollies; small growth candles were beginning to show along the symmetrical rows.

"I think it's a good idea to keep the cattle, Mr. Pat," John was saying. "They'll keep the brush down in the woods, but I'd keep them off those little trees until they get a couple of year's start."

"You know, I still think you would be better off numbering them instead of naming them after friends and relatives," Homer put in. "You might hate to sell a calf named after your granddaughter."

"Well, I've got to keep up with them somehow, and that seemed as good a way as any," Monroe said.

"Have they all calved, yet?" Tidge asked.

"Not yet," Monroe said, "But they will. For once Old Ogden did his job."

"Why'd you name that bull 'Ogden'," Homer asked.

"Because he insisted in doing things his way, and he is going to get his in the end, just like Ogden," Monroe said.

A large well formed red heifer, which had obviously not yet calved, came up to Monroe to get her head scratched.

"Old Polly here is going to have twins," Monroe said.

"That's what I came to tell you!" Otis said

"What!" They all cried in unison.

"Yep," Otis beamed, "Next fall right after Big Thursday."

"I'm speechless," Homer said.

* * * * *

In the far corner of what had been the kudzu patch, in a small spot missed by goats, cows, pellets, fire and Monroe's machete, a small green tendril peeped out of the ground into the warm spring sun, and silently started to creep toward the pines.



**Carroll
Gambrell**

***Spellbinding
Storyteller***

Photo by Cleere Portraits

Service with the 82nd Airborne and two seasons smoke jumping with the U. S. Forest Service didn't rival the thrill of completing his first novel, Author Carroll Gambrell declares. He has drawn from his 30 years in the pulpwood and paper industry to bring reality into unique harmony with humor in *The Kudzu Chronicles*. The story—born as an anecdote and ten years in the making—provides increasing laughter as the plot thickens like the infamous vine around which the action centers.



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