

1946

Afternoon in August

Arthur Hawley Scouten

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Scouten, Arthur Hawley. "Afternoon in August." *New Mexico Quarterly* 16, 3 (1946). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol16/iss3/11>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

AFTERNOON IN AUGUST

Arthur Hawley Scouten

FROM THE HOT GLARE of the noonday sun, Joe walked into the coolness and quiet of the great rotunda of the statehouse. He crossed the wide floor, turned at the elevators, and went down the long corridor until he reached the Governor's office. Inside the doorway he saw the receptionist, who came up, brightly, to greet him.

"Good evening, Miss Hebert," he said, "has Miss Mouton returned from lunch?"

"No," she replied, "she hasn't come back yet. I surely was glad to hear you got such a fine job. Everybody's pleased about it. Won't you come on back here and sit down?"

"Here she is now," he said. "Much obliged, and I'll see you again."

He went on across the office to where a tall, dark girl was walking from the doorway to a desk.

"Hello," he said. "Thought I'd come by and carry you to Jack Guidry's party."

"Why, Joe," she answered, "I'm supposed to be here until four-thirty."

"But, Mouton, Guidry is only here for the day. You can leave the office. If the Governor were here and knew Guidry was in town, he'd come along too. Lazard has come up from New Orleans just for the party."

"It's only one o'clock now," she replied.

"Well, hell, they've got to start the party down at the Cotton Club early because Guidry has to go get his cap and gown for the graduation exercises tonight. Shelby Meagher is outside in his car, and we can go right on down there. He and Joiner drove in from Natchez this morning."

"Well, all right, Joe."

They swung into the driveway, turning off the road, and the wheels of the car threw gravel up against the dusty windows that lined the side of the night club. As they walked inside they could see that the place was empty except for the men seated at one table. They walked on over.

"Mouton, I guess you know everybody here?"

"Yes, of course Mouton knows everybody," said Guidry, as he seated himself again.

"What is it?" said the bartender.

"Hello, Couvillion," said Joe, "bring a quart bottle of whatever beer you got cold."

"No," said Shelby, "wait; bring some Scotch: that's all Mouton ever drinks."

"You don't know," said Guidry. "When Mouton is out with Joe she acts as if she didn't know there was anything you could drink but beer."

"Bring some White Horse anyhow," said Joe. "We're all here to celebrate Jack Guidry's graduation from college. I wonder where Kilbourne is; I told him to be down here early."

"Who's he?" asked Guidry.

"He's a teacher down at school, and a good friend of mine. He came here while you were in the Army. Lazard knows him, don't you, Huger?"

"That's a good one now," said Guidry; "think of Joe having such a fine job down at school. You sure have come a long way. . . ."

"Here's Kilbourne now," interrupted Joe. "You know all these people, Jesse? Miss Mouton, this is Jesse Kilbourne. Oh, I forgot that you knew Isabelle. And this is Jacques Guidry."

"I saw your picture in the morning paper," said Kilbourne.

"Sit down and pour yourself a drink of this Scotch that Couvillion has been saving up for Guidry's return."

"I'd heard that Guidry had the respect of all the bartenders in town, but I didn't know it extended to Scotch in this day and time," said Kilbourne.

"Jesse, you don't know the best one," said Shelby. "Along about 1938 Jack got back from the Sugar Bowl game, dead broke, and no expense account—that was his last season on the team, you know. He went on down to Two Foots' and started explaining to him how he had some backers who were going to sponsor him in opening a big saloon two blocks nearer school. The carpenters were all ready to begin.

'Won't you have a drink for old times sake?' said Two Foots, and I'll be damn'd if Guidry didn't drink there free for the rest of the year."

"But this is the big day for Guidry, isn't it?" said Lazard. "That gives you another record, doesn't it? You started at the university twelve years ago and just now getting your degree."

"And that by special dispensation," said Kilbourne.

"Guidry would 'a been down here sooner," said Shelby, "but Coach Godby carried him through the Library. 'Jack,' he says, 'I know you never been in here before, so just in case you ever come to town during legislature and had to show somebody around the campus, I want you should know what this building is so you can tell your friends.'"

"Godby isn't his real name, is it?" asked Kilbourne.

"No, on the payroll it's God-be-with-you. He's from Walnut Ridge, Arkansas, right below the Missouri line."

"Joe, what you looking so hard about?" asked Lazard. "Don't you believe Shelby's story?"

"Oh, yes," Joe replied. "I was only wondering who told Coach Godby where the Library was."

"Would you care to dance, Mouton?" asked Shelby.

"That's a good idea," said Lazard. "You just beat me to it. Well, I'll wait until the next one."

"A mighty fine gel," said Guidry. "I'm sure proud of you, Joe. That's one of the best-looking women ever came down the pike. I'm glad to see her going out with you. You've come a long way since you used to be rooming with me."

"Joe used to room with you?" asked Kilbourne.

"Yes," said Lazard, "somebody told the coach about how Joe was sleeping on a cot in a garage, and he moved him into Guidry's room, figuring it would do Guidry a lot of good just to be around somebody that spoke English."

"The place is beginning to fill up, now that the orchestra is playing," said Joe, looking out over the dance floor.

"I'm glad to see Joe able to take out a fine girl like Mouton," said Lazard. "I remember one night when Guidry came in after a date, and Joe asked him where he had met the girl. Guidry looked at him a minute and said he'd been standing at the head of North Boulevard and the girl had just come driving along in a big car and picked him up. Well, the next Sunday night Joe borrowed some clothes, caught a ride to town, and stood on the corner at the head of the street and

waited five hours expecting somebody to come along and pick him up. Wait a minute, Shelby; this is my dance with Mouton."

"Hey, Couvillion, let's have another bottle of that White Horse," said Guidry; "some ice, too."

"I'll pay for this one," said Joe.

"Let him pay for it, Guidry," said Shelby. "I get a kick out of seeing Joe able to reach into a pocketbook and bring out some folding money."

"It's not like when I used to have to bring you back sandwiches from the training table, eh, Joe?" said Guidry.

"You remember, Joe," said Shelby, "you remember the time Big George got you out of bed, brought you back on the night shift the time he fired the nigger off'n the cement mixer?"

"I know that one," said Guidry. "He put Joe to dumping the mixer, and when morning come his hands were jest a-bleeding."

"They'd have been bleeding before morning," said Joe, "if I hadn't found Fidly-Didly the hophead and sent him for a pair of gloves."

"Well, that sure was funny," continued Shelby. "Big George come down there at daylight, and I was with him. I'll never forget what a comical look you had on your face. It sure was funny. There Joe stood, dumping that mixer, and every time he pulled that long iron lever some blood dripped from his hands."

"Joe done all right," said Rufe Joiner, speaking for the first time. "I always said a white man could work a nigger down to a nub if'n he taken a notion to do it."

"Have some Scotch, Mouton, and rest awhile," said Joe. "That was a bad winter. I had to work on the night shift a lot. That was the year I took my Master's. I used to stay down there and run the water pump for the excavating crew and read Saurat's *Milton* all night."

"I know Saurat," said Guidry. "He fought Kid Williams in the Municipal Auditorium at 155 pounds. 'At was the fightin'est Cajun I ever see."

"Mouton, would you dance this one with me?" asked Joe.

"Jack, that was another Saurat," said Kilbourne.

"Well, they's a lot of them Saurats," replied Guidry; "that's a big family. They all come from around Golden Meadow."

"You made Joe sore," said Lazard, absently.

"No, he didn't," replied Shelby; "Joe's just thinking, but I'll go bring them back and we'll fix another drink."

"I don't believe I finished the one I had," she said, as they all sat down.

"Save the pieces, Rufel" said Shelby.

"Couvillion, send somebody over to clean this table," said Kilbourne.

"Oh, everybody messes one up, like the way Guidry did in the Texas game."

"But Guidry could always make a decision, and go through with it, even if it was the wrong one," said Joe.

"It was fourth down, anyhow, and that was why he had to kick."

"That's where you're wrong; it was third down, and he'd gone off his nut from getting kicked in the head the last time he carried the ball."

Joe turned around and said softly, "Isabelle, would you marry me?"

"Listen at that!" said Guidry; "he's gonna get married. That's a fine idea."

"I think it's a fine idea," said Joe, "especially if you'd let me alone for a minute."

"What d'ye think? Joe's gonna get married."

"I sure am proud of Joe," said Shelby. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Joe. You can have my car. I'll need it next week, but you'll have time to go down to the Gulf Coast and back."

"Don't leave me out," said Guidry. "Y'all come on down to my place at Rouget when you're on your way, and I'll give you a case of champagne."

"Where is your place now?" asked Shelby.

"Fust turn at Rouget and half a mile east on the LaPlace road."

"I thought it was two miles off the Airline twarge the river."

"Hell, it used to be. You don't know what a close one I had right before I went into the Army. A bunch of dopes come up from Gretna and got a fight started when I wasn't in the joint. I come in jest in time to see the place all tore up. They'd got behind the bar and was throwing bottles all around. I figured I was ruint. Jest then I seen a fire starting where a fella had throwed a cig, and I remembered the ten gallons of gas I had hid right near there, as well as some coal oil under the bar. Well, I run on down to the road and pulled out two of the iron pipes from the bridge into the driveway. By that time somebody had give the alarm, and up comes the firetrucks jest a-tearing.

The front one dropped in there, and he blocked off the other ones from getting by, and I got enough insurance to set up this new place."

"What I want to do first is get a new suit of clothes," said Joe.

"That's right, a man needs a new suit to get married in."

"I kin remember when Joe didn't have no suit at all."

"Hell, yes, you remember the time when Bud McGehee gave him a white linen suit, all for his own?"

"Yeh, I guess that's the first time Joe ever had a coat and pants to match."

"Well, it wasn't entirely my fault; you might say that it's a matter of chance that I was so poor."

"Whadda ya mean, chance?"

"Purely accidental; just the chance of a minié ball hitting Albert Sidney Johnston on an artery in his leg."

"Look here," retorted Guidry, in a rage, "don't you come at me wit' 'at stuff. General Johnston brung his three corps on the field each one stretched all across the length of the whole God dam' field, from Lick Creek to Owl, all straddled out in front of each other, instead of bringing 'em up separate and arranging 'em in depth, side by side, like he should 'a done. There was nothing Beauregard could do but blow for cease firing."

"Look at that!" exclaimed Kilbourne. "Here is Guidry; it has taken him twelve years to get through college, and here he has been fighting in France and Germany without being able to name any places he had been in, when the reporters asked him, and yet he knows the exact positions at the battle of Shiloh."

"What are you talking about?" said Joe. "Don't you know it's a prime characteristic of French culture that the people never take any deep concern over anything unless it has meaning?"

"If you want to do something that has meaning, you had better hurry on down town and get your license before five o'clock."

"All right, I'll go on out and catch a bus now. I want to go to Thrigmore's and get my suit before they close."

"That's a boy, Joe," said Shelby; "you can go into any store in town now and buy a suit of clothes. I'm proud of you. You know Joe has come a long way."

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Kilbourne; "let's go over to my house, and we can eat dinner there when Joe gets back with his marriage license and his new suit."

"I can't come. I'm sorry, but I have to get my cap and gown and march in the parade, but I'll see you later."

"Well, then, we'll go on over to Jesse's in my car and wait for you there," said Shelby.

"Does this suit you, Mouton?"

"Yes," she answered, "we've got to eat dinner sometime."

"Well, roomie, good luck to you; you've sure got a beautiful girl there. Don't forget to come by Rouget and get the champagne."

"What's taking him so long?" asked Mrs. Kilbourne.

"Don't get in a fret; here he is now."

"Come on in," said Mrs. Kilbourne, moving towards the doorway. "I'm so excited thinking about you and Mouton."

"And there is the new suit. Boy, it sure is a honey!"

"That's a fine suit of clothes."

"A man needs a good suit to get married in," said Kilbourne.

"What's in this envelope, the license?"

"Let's look at it."

"Hey, it's not a license," said Shelby; "it's a bus ticket. Only *one* ticket, too! Let me look. One ticket to Wilson, North Carolina."

"Well," said Joe, "you know I've always wanted to see one of those tobacco auctions they hold there. I thought I'd go up and watch one."