

1953

A Piney Woods Idyll

Wesley Ford Davis

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

Recommended Citation

Davis, Wesley Ford. "A Piney Woods Idyll." *New Mexico Quarterly* 23, 3 (1953). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol23/iss3/8>

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.

Wesley Ford Davis

A PINEY WOODS IDYLL

THOMAS JACKSON Jarred slipped to the ground, and reaching up he pulled the croquer sack of fresh field peas off the mule's rump, and still without checking the speed of the team old Uncle June said, "Goodbye, Mist' Tom," and Tom lifted a hand in farewell. He watched the negro swing the eight-foot whip and the high-wheeled log cart creak and swing away toward the sawmill, the lash exploding like a rifle shot by the lead mule's ear.

Little Buck Williams came dodging through the clumps of palmettoes, pushing an automobile tire as tall as himself, and piping, "What you got in that sack, Thomas Jackson Jar'd?"

"Old Bloody-Bones, boy. Maybe I'll put you in the sack with him."

Little Buck gave the sack a kick with his bare foot. "Just more goddam blackeyed peas. I hope you don't give my Mama any more of them things. I can't stay in the house with them things cooking. The way they smell."

"Say, Little Buck, have you seen Andrew Jackson?"

Little Buck pointed toward the boardinghouse. "He's in the big house. Stuck in there. Where he stays all the time since he got salvation."

Tom gave the tire a great push along one of the maze of foot-paths. "Catch that, boy," he said. Little Buck went streaking after the tire.

The sawmill whistle blew for quitting time as Tom hurried along the west side of the big house, the camp boardinghouse kept by his Uncle Seab and his Aunt Sallie. Throwing down the sack of peas he dropped to his hands and knees. Under the house the white sand stretched out bare and wavy like a picture of a windblown lake. The tiny sawmill under the middle of the house

was buried almost out of sight. Apparently Andrew had not worked at sawmilling for several days.

Tom crawled under the front porch to where the sand was dotted with green field peas which had fallen through the cracks overhead. Where the peas were thickest he saw the marks of Andrew's body where he lay and listened to the women talk while they shelled peas. And where his hand had smoothed the sand, scratched in big block capitals, were the words: SAVES JESUS AMIE LOU IN THE BEGINN....

The wind on the sand had blurred part of the writing.

A week ago, on Saturday afternoon, Tom had got home early and had found Andrew under the porch, writing in the sand, listening to the women talk. They talked of the meeting and of Brother Mims Cruddup and his lovely sister Amie Lou. Tom had demanded in a harsh whisper, "What are you doing under here, trying to see up the women's dresses?"

Andrew put a finger to his pursed lips while overhead the peas tap-tapped into the tin pans and the talk rose and fell steady as bees in a swarm.

"I got saved last Tuesday, Tom," Andrew whispered, "And baptized Wednesday, down at the creek."

Tom stared at his little brother.

"I have been *born again*, Tom, and washed in the blood of the Lamb. When I come up out of the water, Tom, Sister Amie Lou wrapped a blanket around me and held me in her arms. She said I should never think of anything but the Lord and his work. I never felt so good before, Tom."

Tom continued to stare into his brother's thin solemn face. None of the excitement of his speech was reflected in his pale pinched features. Tom could think of nothing to say. He checked a sudden urge to take hold of Andrew and shake him. Then he remembered their plans for tomorrow.

"Come on, Andy, let's go feed Tom Jeff and I'll tell you what we're going to do tomorrow."

"I've got to go to the meeting tomorrow, Tom. It's *all day* tomorrow. Preaching and singing and dinner on the ground."

His head swelled and throbbed with a sudden black hatred for his brother. His hands moved toward Andrew's head to take him by the hair and shake some sense into him. But again he checked himself. He couldn't hate Andrew. Since their father's death and their mother's illness, *he* had looked after Andrew.

The next day, Sunday, with Tom Jeff, the three-legged bobcat, on a leash, and a hatred for Sister Amie Lou swelling inside him, Tom started out before daybreak to make the trip across the Econlochatchet River into the virgin pine woods, which stretched unbroken still southward to the Everglades. By the time it was light enough to see he had calmed himself sufficiently so as to be able to look for birds. He tramped through the tall timber all day, looking for an ivory-billed woodpecker. Since the teacher gave him the birdbook two years before, he and Andrew had observed every bird listed for the region except the ivory-bill. The ivory-bill was all but extinct.

It was long past dark when he got home, but Andrew and Aunt Sallie were still at the meeting. Sometimes the meetings lasted 'til midnight.

So Andrew had spent another Saturday afternoon under the porch listening to the women talk of the preacher's message and his lovely sister Amie Lou who sang like one of the heavenly host. Tom examined the words in the sand more closely. They were fresh all right—today's. He felt sick and helpless. He clenched his fist and thrust it against the name of Amie Lou. With a savage sweep of his hand he destroyed the words. And in their place he saw the words of the note.

On Monday morning when he had left home before daybreak to go to his week's work, he had left the note in Andrew's pocket, along with some money. He had taken great care in writing the note. Word for word he spelled it out now on the sand.

Meet me at Whitey's Bones as soon after dinner next Saturday as you can get there. Bring cheese, sardines, soda crackers, and chocolate snaps. We'll eat and sleep out the way you been wanting to for so long, and go as far as we can in a day and a half. A timber estimator from over in Volusia County just got back from riding the woods nearly to the Glades. He claims he saw *two pair* of ivory-bills. His descriptions of them were exactly right. Bring Tom Jeff with you. If you put him on the leash he can keep up allright.

See you Saturday. Your brother Tom.

At noon Tom had quit work, collected his week's wages, shouldered the croquer sack of peas which Zittrower gave him along with his cash wages, and headed cross-country to Whitey's Bones. An hour's walk from the highway he struck Little Creek and followed it westward to its junction with the Econlochatchet River. The creek widened as it approached the river and the hammock grew thicker. Tom walked in deep shadow, where the few spots of sunlight lay on the black loam like gold coins in a dream.

He came to the sandbar formed by the junction of the streams. The rising and falling water in the rainy season had left the sandbar clean and white. At the edge of the clearing he stopped to scratch Whitey's bleached skull. The bones of the pineywoods cow had hung in the low fork of the water-oak since the big hurricane; the flooding river had left her in the tree and the buzzards had picked her clean. Tom and Andrew never passed her by without speaking.

"Andy hasn't been here today, has he, Whitey?"

He studied the sand. There were no fresh prints, except those of birds and squirrels. Dropping the croquer sack in the middle of the clearing, he put his ear to the ground. He heard only the faraway drumming of a woodpecker. He listened for a moment and nodded his head. It would be a yellowhammer, what the bird-book called a flicker.

On his belly he crept to the point where the streams joined. The water on the bar was brown but clear as glass. From the watch-pocket of his overalls he fished out a small grasshopper. It kicked feebly as he tossed it on the clear water. In a moment the shallow filled with minnows swarming about the grasshopper, some of them small, black and speckled, some of them finger-length redhorses. Then a bigmouth, as long as his forearm paddled into the shallow. His tail went swish-swish fast and he shot forward to take the grasshopper, but his big belly scraped on the sand and with a great flounce he was away again into the deep black water. The minnows had vanished like magic. Tom laughed, "Strut your stuff, big boy, while you can. We'll come down here one day soon and catch you good."

He waited while the minnows cautiously returned, wanting to see a perch or a bream. Finally it came. A warmouth, so dark green it was almost black, with gold along the gills. It lay on its side, wallowing in the sand like a hen. It paid no attention to the minnows struggling with the grasshopper. After awhile it moved out again into the black water.

Tom moved upstream to the edge of a quiet slough. When the cold weather came they would shoot wood ducks here. Andrew was old enough now to learn to use the shotgun. But now the slough was alive with water-bugs, swimming or running on top of the water with hardly a ripple. Round and round they made their crazy zig-zag patterns. He wondered how they managed without bumping into each other. Watching them made him dizzy. He walked back to the clearing, and from the far side Whitey's skull flashed the sun into his eyes. He waved his hand at her and then sat down and put his ear to the ground. There was still no sound of footsteps.

At the edge of the clearing a cat squirrel sat on the frond of a swamp palm and barked at him, then disappeared into the hammock. The clearing was still and quiet. It made him drowsy. He tried to think of Andrew and of Amie Lou and of the note he had

left in Andrew's pocket, but all of it blurred in his mind. After awhile he lay back against the sack of peas and gazed into the clear blue sky. A woodpecker came and tapped on a tree at the edge of the clearing. He didn't bother to look at it. It had called once raucously and he knew it to be a redhead. Now its tapping grew steady. He closed his eyes.

Here in the clearing in the hammock it had happened before. It happened as in the poem the teacher had read to him. The teacher who had given him the birdbook, she who couldn't hear it thunder without the black box and the horn to her ear, had read him her favorite poem, a poem about the song of a nightingale. She had tried to explain its last line, "Was it a vision or a waking dream?"

"Sometimes," she said, "something happens to free a person from the shackles of time and space; and past, present, and future become one." And he had asked his older brother Jeff if he knew what the teacher meant, and Jeff had said that old lady Yearling had been deaf so long that she had got as batty as a bedbug.

The tapping of the woodpecker grew suddenly louder. Opening his eyes, he started to turn on his side to look at it. But he didn't need to turn on his side. The live-oak where the woodpecker had tapped had grown as tall as a cypress, and the limb where the woodpecker moved forward with quick hitches was the size of a man's waist and reached across the clearing. The woodpecker was no redhead. The great shining bill flashed like a chisel as it pounded fast and hard against the limb. As tall as a bantam rooster it moved through spots of sunlight where its redbreast blazed and its crest stood sharp and clear. It was an ivory-bill.

He spoke aloud. "In a minute I'll reach over and wake Andrew to see the ivory-bill," he said.

But there was no hurry to wake Andrew, for there was no end to the ivory-bill's pounding. The live-oak limb reached like a rainbow to the end of the world.

The hammock was alive now with downy woodpeckers, flecked

with red, each of them no bigger than the ivory-bill's head. Their small tappings were a background for the big woodpecker's pounding. Across the clearing a flamingo, pink as the first coloring of sunrise, flapped unhurriedly to light at the top of a tall palm. Watching it he wondered why the big pink bird had strayed so far from the Everglades. Then he lay down again and gazed into the soft blue sky. He raised his hand and thrust it into the blue sky, and watched a white cloud drift and divide against his arm and pass on across the sky.

Hearing a new sound he sat up and looked toward the river. Near the river where the ferns grew thick and tall, a bobcat tumbled and stretched, crushing the ferns down into a soft bed. He rolled and twisted like any housecat, but the short twisted tail made him a bobcat all right, and his conical pointed ears like a horned owl's, and his great size. He was as big as Tom Jeff, but he had four good legs.

A rabbit came and the bobcat pounced on it and bit it once on the neck. Then it ran in circles. As long as it ran in circles the bobcat watched it, but when the rabbit stopped the bobcat ate it quickly, eating it from head to rear, leaving only the fluffy tail. Finished eating the cat rolled and tumbled and washed himself, and the sun moved quickly down the sky. It shone on the cat's brindle back and the tiny pool of the rabbit's blood. A light breeze picked up the rabbit's fluff of a tail settling it lightly on the stream where it moved away into the green and black tunnel. In the bright light the bobcat blinked and stretched and went to sleep on the bed of ferns.

The bobcat slept without moving. Tom could have reached across the clearing and stroked its brindle coat. Andrew slept, too, without moving, a mere walking-baby, cuddled in the bed of their wagon on a pallet of croquer sacks. After the accident when their father was killed, he brought Andrew to the clearing nearly every day. Their mother could not stand to look at Andrew. He, the youngest, reminded her most of their father. When a fly or a

mosquito lit on Andrew, Tom would slap it neatly and kill it. They came and were killed while Andrew and the bobcat slept without a stir. And Tom would watch the creek and the clearing and watch for the panther.

When the panther came, Tom would be lying on his stomach by the slough where the water was still, watching the water-bugs making their crazy circles. As he watched them he took one of them in his fingers to examine it closely, trying to find its eyes. Behind him was the regular pounding of the axe where his cousin Walter and his older brother Jefferson were cutting a cabbage palm for supper. The panther came and stood in a small clearing across the creek.

He stared into the panther's liquid gold eyes, while behind him the chopping ceased and Walter's voice spoke sharp and quiet. "Be still. Don't move, Thomas. You too, Jeff."

He heard the click as Walter cocked the rifle, and the panther's tail curled and uncurled its tip, slow and easy. Walter would be raising the rifle and squeezing the trigger slow and easy. He was a perfect rifle shot.

Thomas saw his own image in the panther's eye. He waited for the shot. Seized by a great terror he waited for the shot that would strike him full in the face. Then the panther turned and was gone.

He heard Jeff let out a breath like a long sigh, saying, "Damn, Walter, you look like you seen a ghost!" And Walter's answer, slow, too, "Hell, you don't look exactly like a red rose yourself."

Then Jeff had him by the arm, hauling him away from the creek bank, scolding him. "And you layen right there in front of that big sonofabitch. He could have swallowed you whole and you never would have knowed what happened." He broke loose and backed out of Jeff's reach.

"I seen him before y'all said anything. I seen him when he first come into the clearing. He wasn't aiming to hurt anybody." Thomas backed up as Jeff moved toward him.

"What the hell do you know about what a painter aims to do?" He pursed his lips and shot a thin stream of tobacco juice toward Thomas's eyes, but Thomas had backed out of range.

"Did you hear that, Walter? He says he seen that cat all the time and just lay there 'thout saying a word. Why didn't you wade across and pet him? Was you afraid of getting your feet wet?" Thomas had backed up to the edge of the clearing.

"I looked right into his eyes," he said. "I could see he wasn't aiming to hurt anybody."

"You lying little bastard." Jeff's head swung from side to side, his eyes searching the ground for a stick, but Thomas was gone into the underbrush.

Thomas sat up quickly. He jumped to his feet and swung the croquer sack of fresh field peas over his shoulder. The sun had sunk far into the southwest, but the clearing was still bright at its east edge beyond the growing shadows, and Whitey's skull shone from the live oak like a pale yellow lantern. He strained his ears listening. There was no sound of Andrew's coming.

He was reluctant now to leave the clearing. Even now, the story went on forever, as it had grown through countless tellings. He had stood beside the tall wooden box where Andrew was kept during the mad-dog-days of summer and told the wide-eyed baby about the panther.,

Shh-h. Now you listen to me. I'll tell you all about the painter. They're yellow like this tall pine box, only brighter like gold—more like yellow pine when it's fresh cut. They're long as Mama's big bed and tall as the bib of my overalls standing. Their eyes burn at night like two balls of fire. When they sneak up on anything at night they have to pull their eyelids down tight to hide all that fire, and smell their way along. You see this fourpenny nail I pulled out of this box that you snagged out your tooth on. A painter has claws longer and sharper than this nail. One of them is curled up under each toe. If a painter was to run across this floor, you could hear them claws clicking like butterbeans in a paper sack. Boy, they can slice you with them claws worse than a nigger with a razor. You don't want to be caught

out in the woods where there's a painter 'thout I'm with you. You understand that? You don't want to be caught out in the woods where there's painters. . . .

At the edge of the clearing he stopped to say so long to Whitey. He reached up to scratch her skull between the horns, but there in one of Whitey's eyes sat a tiny black spider. The scarlet hour glass on its abdomen caught a ray of sunlight and burned like a tiny fire.

"Well, Whitey, when did the damn little black widows move in on you?"

With a small sharp stick in his hand he stood on tiptoe. "Well, Whitey, we'll get rid of this little widow, anyhow."

Stretching upward he thrust the stick hard at the spider. The stick missed the spider, and his fist crashed against Whitey's skull. Her bones clattered down like hailstones.

Tom stared at the live oak tree, so suddenly bare, and at Whitey's scattered bones.

Riding an invisible thread the black widow swung into a streak of sunlight. Tom snatched up the croquer sack of peas and flung them at the spider. The sack flew open and the peas scattered over the ground. The spider went swinging away into the underbrush.

Tom picked up the peas slowly, methodically putting them into the sack. He kept his eyes fixed on the peas. When he was done he picked up Whitey's skull. He walked to the river and slung the skull out into the middle of the stream, where it blinked for a moment in the sunlight and disappeared into the slow dark current.

Tom shouldered the sack of peas and moved quickly out of the hammock toward the logging road from which came the sound like rifle fire of Uncle June's whip.

II

There came again the sharp explosions of Uncle June's whip, from away beyond the sawmill now as he headed the team to

the mule lot. And the yard beyond the edge of the house on the mill side was full of moving feet and the short lengths of overall leg above the tops of work shoes. He watched Uncle Seab's brogans cross the yard, twice as long as the others; he, the big man of the camp, part owner and sawmill boss. A pair of lowcuts moved with quick precise steps to keep up, two steps to Uncle Seab's one. They were Peewee Griffin's. He hated the sawmill and talked of leaving the woods to get a job in town, but he had talked about it for so long that nobody now believed he would ever do it. But after washing up for supper he would put on a white shirt and bright bowtie and his blue serge suit.

Tom watched the various pairs of shoes cross the yard converging toward the back porch, the pump and the wash shelf. He waited for a sight of Andrew's bare feet and the three-legged bobcat shuffling along behind. After a few moments a last pair of shoes entered the yard. It was Jeff, his older brother, who operated the sawmill carriage and stayed a few minutes after quitting time each evening to oil the carriage blocks for the next day's run. When Jeff's feet rose from sight onto the backporch the yard was empty, and overhead were the scuffling sounds of many pairs of feet as the men finished washing and dispersed through the big house to await the call to supper. Suddenly from behind the house out beyond the chickenyard came Tom Jeff's shrill guttural cry, like a muffled scream. Tom looked again at the writing in the sand, reading the message: Meet me at Whitey's Bones . . . With a savage sweep of his hand he destroyed the words and moved quickly out from under the house.

The twilight had changed to dusk. Away to the west the sun had dropped behind the Econlochachet Hammock. Tom moved away from the house, angling across the yard to skirt around Aunt Sallie's big chickenyard. Tom Jeff's cry came again at a higher pitch. He had caught scent of Tom. He sounded hungry and mad. Tom hurried his steps. He wondered if Andrew had been feeding the big cat, and suddenly he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

"Damn Andy to hell." He heard his own words with shock and surprise. And thought quickly. No, not him. Her. Damn her. "Think of nothing but the Lord's work," she had told him. And she had held him in her arms and wrapped a blanket around him. "I never felt so good in my life before," Andy had said.

Tom had seen her several times—when the tent meeting first opened. He had seen her on the platform, with her head tilted back, the lamplight in her eyes like stars as she sang of the far-off sweet forever. He, too, had thought of her, had even dreamed of her, and the men in the bunkhouse up at Zittrower's bandied her name about and scribbled it on privy walls.

He had gone to her house, the long-abandoned Cracker house she and her brother Mims Cruddup were using while they ran the meeting. He wanted to see her away from the tent and the pale lamplight.

He leaned hard against the doorjamb gripping the .22 rifle hard. Even before he had got to the doorstep she had heard him coming; probably she had seen him even before he approached the house; she had called out from inside, "Come on in."

He stood in the front door. One shoulder pressed hard against the doorjamb and the rifle held high in both hands, and when Amie Lou walked across the room not just holding the rifle but holding to it. She crossed the room, moving away from him, and the way she walked, easy as a minnow swimming in still water, was like no woman Tom had seen could ever walk. She sat down on the windowsill at the west side of the room, her back to the afternoon sun, and crossed her ankles above her soft blue high-heeled slippers, and said:

"Are you out to shoot somebody, Mister Tom?"

Her calling him Mister Tom made him feel foolish. He said, "Just birds is all, Mam."

"Did you have any luck?"

He took two turtle doves from his overalls pocket. She got up and moved toward him and through her skirt the sun edged her

thighs. His hand squeezed the doves; he felt the crunch of their small bones. He jerked his eyes away from Amie Lou and looked at the birds.

"What kind of birds are they, Tom?"

"They're doves, Mam, turtle doves."

"Goodness sakes, Mister Tom, don't you know that the Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove and rested on Jesus' shoulder?"

"Yes Mam," he said, "Aunt Sallie has told us about the dove a good many times."

"And you still shoot doves and eat them?"

"Yes Mam. With their feathers off they look about like quail."

She laughed. Her white teeth flashed. They were pearly white, and her lips were red, her hair was jet-black, long and wavy. She took the doves and waved them through the streak of sunlight.

"Look at their feathers turn all colors, Tom."

She wasn't teasing now. He kept his eyes fixed hard on the birds. "Yes Mam," he said, "a turtle dove is about the prettiest bird in the world when you take a close look at it."

"Who do you think is the prettiest girl you ever took a close look at, Tom?"

Now she had said it. And the way she said it. It was not teasing. He took his time answering this.

"I believe everybody thinks you are the prettiest girl anybody ever saw around here, Miss Amie Lou."

"You are just kidding me, Tom."

"No Mam, that's what everybody says."

She looked so straight at him he had to look back down at the rifle. His fingers fidgeted in the wedge of the rear sight.

"How old are you, Tom?"

"Fourteen, Mam."

"You're the biggest fourteen-year-old boy I ever saw."

"All the men in our family are big, Mam, except my Uncle Henry. And my little brother Andrew. I don't believe he is going to be very big."

He was ready to go now. He said, "Well, Mam, I just dropped by to see how you and Brother Mims were making out and to see if I could do anything to help you out."

She spoke as if she had not heard what he said.

"You're going to give me those two doves, aren't you, Tom?"

"Oh, yes Mam, I was aiming to do that. I'll go out on the back-porch and clean them for you, Mam."

He had plucked and gutted the birds quickly and left. He had told Andrew the whole story exactly as it happened, had tried to explain what it meant, but it had done no good. Andy had got sillier and crazier and thought of nothing but Amie Lou and the far-off sweet forever.

As he approached Tom Jeff's cage a strip of light fell suddenly across his path. Looking up toward the backporch he saw Andrew come through the kitchen door and cross the backporch. Beyond Andrew, in the kitchen, Aunt Sallie lit a second kerosene lamp, turned up the wick, and moved toward the dining-room.

Andrew carried a plate in his hands. Tom watched him step down from the porch and move toward him in the dusk. He felt a sudden rush of exhilaration, and moved quickly to meet him, his mind full of a thousand things to tell his little brother. But before he could speak Andrew called out, "What are you doing here, Tom? Thought you'd be halfway to the Glades by now."

He stopped. He stared at his brother. It was Andrew's voice he had heard, but the casual words might have been spoken by anybody, and his reply was a peevish retort.

"I waited for you down by the river like the note said."

"I thought you knew the meeting was going on through this week. They have even been talking about staying on here, with so many people getting saved, and setting up a regular church."

"You could have sent me word up to Zittrower's by one of the lumber trucks, couldn't you, after you read the note?"

"I meant to, Tom. I thought about it more than once. But I had so many things to do this week, with the meetings every night, I just didn't get around to doing it."

Tom turned away. He wiped his sleeve savagely across his eyes, and under his breath he cursed himself. Andrew spoke hurriedly.

"I got to feed Tom Jeff and hurry back to the house to change clothes for the meeting."

Facing his brother, he looked at the plate in his hands and asked, "What have you got in that plate you're toting?"

"Scraps. Scraps from the dinner table."

"What for? The chickens?"

"Why no. The chickens are already roosting. They're for Tom Jeff."

"You know goddam well Tom Jeff won't eat that stuff."

"He does now. He's been eating scraps from the table since last Tuesday."

"You lazy little bastard." He grabbed Andrew by the shoulders and began to shake him. "Didn't I leave eight or nine quail in that box when I left here Monday morning? Haven't you been to the traps this week?"

Andrew struggled to break loose. Tom tightened his hold. Andrew's face was screwed up and he spoke through his clenched teeth.

"Aunt Sallie says we're not to feed them live birds to Tom Jeff anymore. Brother Mims Cruddup was over here Monday morning and saw me feeding Tom Jeff. He told Aunt Sallie that feeding the cat live birds didn't seem to him like the right thing to do."

Andrew began to cry and Tom was aware of his fingers biting deep into his brother's thin shoulders. He released his hold.

"I might have known it," he said. "The sons a bitches. They couldn't even let Tom Jeff alone." With a quick upswipe of his hand, he spun the plate of table slops into Andrew's face and chest.

"Now that'll give you a good reason to go change your clothes."

The plate fell to the ground and broke neatly into two pieces. He turned and walked away. He heard Andrew call after him, "Aunt Sallie'll have Uncle Seab tan you for breaking that plate."

By the light of a match he counted the quail. There were seven of them, heads together, roosting in a circle. A few yards away Tom Jeff was scratching at his chickenwire cage. His shrill guttural cry came regularly as he heard and smelled Tom at the quail cage.

He would give Tom Jeff a last good feed, all the fresh quail he could eat. But not even a starving bobcat can eat seven quail. Taking three of the quail from the cage, one at a time, he flung them into the dark night. They whirled out over the privy into the cut-over pine woods. One at a time he pulled the heads off the remaining birds and tossed the pieces, warm and fluttering, into Tom Jeff's cage.

For a few moments there was only the snuffling sound of the cat's eating and the small crunching of the quail's bones. Finally he spoke to the cat. "I would just turn you loose," he said, "but you wouldn't go anywhere. If you did you'd be back tomorrow." He stroked the bobcat's brindle back. Tom Jeff was losing a lot of his hair and much of his bright color. "I can't have you around here anymore, Tom Jeff. I've got to start over."

Slamming the cage door shut, and latching it, he walked quickly toward the house. As he passed the kitchen window he saw Andrew, dressed now in his Sunday knickers and black stockings and hightop shoes, go to the water bucket, take the dipper and drink, and move back toward the front of the house.

From under the backporch Tom got a shovel and a light axe and returned to the cage. He put a collar on Tom Jeff and hooked one end of a four-foot stick to the collar. Tom Jeff had finished the quail and was in a playful mood. Rolling on his back he struck at Tom with his good front paw. He didn't like being on the stick, which he hadn't worn regularly for several years.

Five years ago, Tom and Jeff had taken the bobcat from the steeltrap. He had been almost full grown even then. Tom's thoughts drifted back. It seemed only yesterday when he had filed one of Jeff's old switchblade knives to a fine edge, whetted

it until it would shave like a razor, and amputated the bobcat's crushed leg. Andrew stood in the wooden box, shrieking, "Painter, painter . . ." And Tom said, "No, boy, this ain't no painter. I can't bring you no painter. This bobcat will have to do." The job done, he nailed the cat up in a box, after soaking the bleeding stump in turpentine, and left it howling and licking its wound for three days. Then he had tamed it, day after day, slapping its face and paws with a flat paddle when it tried to bite or scratch, keeping the muzzle on him most of the time, and their father had named it. It being a gift from the older brothers, Tom and Jeff, to the younger brother, Andrew, he named the bobcat Tom Jeff. After working with the cat for many days, one day Tom had put him into Andrew's box. Andrew pushed his face into the cat's fine brindle coat and purred like a kitten.

He led the bobcat down the path, on past the privy, to where the wire grass and palmettoes grew sparsely in the white sand. At the end of the stick Tom Jeff loped along on his three legs.

The sky in the east was beginning to shine with a silver light. In a few minutes the full moon would rise over the rim of the hammock. Tom hesitated, watching the sky grow lighter. It was going to be a clear bright night. Why not just keep walking, and take Tom Jeff along? Why come back here at all? Zittrower would give him steady work, might even give him one of the little cabins to live in. The funny little Yankee liked him. He knew that. Or at least came as close to liking him as he could to liking anybody. And Zittrower's place was only a two-hour walk, cross country, from Whitey's Bones.

Suddenly he felt a little dizzy. Stopping, he clenched his eyes to clear his head. He saw Whitey's skull flash on the slow brown current and slowly sink from sight. He wheeled around to speak to the bobcat.

The bobcat lay down and rolled over on his back to wrestle with the stick. His eyes grew wet and the image of the cat blurred and flickered in the pale light. Raising his arm he rubbed his

eyes vigorously and after a moment he said, "You lucky old son-of-a-gun." Tightening his hold on the stick he led the cat into the sparse growth of palmettoes.

In a clear white patch of sand, he dropped the shovel and took a tight grip on the axe handle, and gripping the end of the stick tight in his left hand, he pushed the cat's head out away from himself, forcing it downward. And as the moon rose full over the rim of the hammock and outlined the cat sharply against the sand, he raised the axe, blade upward, and brought the blunt edge down hard against the base of the cat's skull.

He knelt beside the cat and looked into its face. The lips were pulled back, the mouth set in a brilliant white grin. The soft gold eyes had turned to glass. Tom pressed the eyelids down.

In a few minutes he had finished burying the cat in the soft white sand. Then he took the axe and shovel and walked back toward the house whose rough weather-boarding shone like silver in the moonlight. Before he reached the house he saw his older brother, Jeff, step off the backporch and walk toward the woodpile; he blew a few warm-up notes on his mouth harp as he crossed the yard. Tom replaced the axe and shovel under the house. The house was quiet now; all the rear rooms were dark. Nearly everybody was gone to the meeting. Tom crossed the yard to the woodpile, where Jeff sat now on the choppingblock, playing "The Brown's Ferry Blues." As Tom approached, Jeff quit playing and sang: "I got a gal lives up town. Makes her livin' from the hips on down. Lawd, Lawd, I got them Brown's Ferry Blues. I don't know what's comin' of me, Ol' cawn liquor won't let me be. Lawd, Lawd, I got them Brown's Ferry Blues."

Tom sat down on a block of wood a few feet from Jeff, and said, "What you say, Jeff?"

"Where you been, Tom? I didn't see you at supper. Didn't know you had got home yet. Figured you was traipsing around in the woods again looking for one of the damn big Lord God wood-peckers."

"I got home just before dark. I found ol' Tom Jeff dead in his

cage. I reckon he had just died a little while before I found him. I carried him out there in the palmettoes and buried him."

"Well, I'll be damn. You mean ol' Tom Jeff is dead. It was beginning to look like he never would die. I expect he was the oldest cat in the whole state of Florida. I reckon he was too old to be much good, to himself or to anybody else, any-more."

They were silent for a few moments. Once in awhile Jeff would whistle a few notes of some blues song he had picked up from the Negro hands. Finally Tom said, "Why don't you sing some more, Jeff?"

"I believe I'll chew a little bit first."

Jeff took a fresh cut of Brown's Mule from the watch pocket of his overalls and bit a corner off it. He offered the plug to Tom. "Have you started chewin' tobacco yet?" Tom nodded. He bit a corner off the plug and rolled it around on his tongue, tasting it. Jeff laughed. "I reckon you *have* started chewin' tobacco—right this minute." He laughed again. "Go ahead and chomp the stuff. It can't bite you back."

After spitting a great brown web on the sand, Jeff began to sing again. "One of these mawnings, won't be long, Cap'n gon' call and I'll be gone. Lawd, Lawd, I got them Brown's Ferry Blues."

The song went on and on with Jeff playing the harp and singing the stanzas alternately. All around them, in the full moon light, the yard shone like a lake. After awhile Jeff slapped the harp hard against his thigh to clear it. Tom said, "I know another verse to that song."

"You think you know a verse to that song that I aint heard before?"

"You go ahead and blow the harp and I'll sing it."

Jeff slapped the harp again on his thigh and played softly while Tom sang. "Two ol' maids playin' in the san', each one wishin' the other was a man. Lawd, Lawd, I got them Brown's Ferry Blues."

Jeff laughed. Well, I'll be damn. Where did you hear that one?"

"A fellow up at Zittrower's. He said he had come from Waycross."

"Did you learn any more?"

"Not that I ain't already heard you sing before. But I might pick up some more next week. There's nearly always some new fellah coming in, that sings a song, or part of one, that I ain't heard before."

Jeff stood up, tucked the mouth harp away in the side pocket of his overalls, and taking the wad of tobacco from his mouth, tossed it out across the sandy yard. He said, "You better go and get you some supper."

"Where you going, Jeff?"

"Down to the Quarters, for a little scooter-pooing maybe. I'll see you afterwhile."

He crossed the yard toward the path which led past the commissary and on to the mill and to the Negro quarters beyond. Tom sat on the block, looking after Jeff, watching his shadow going before him across the white sand and then climbing up the commissary wall. He bit his lip to keep from calling out after Jeff. And then Jeff stopped, at the edge of the yard, and turned around. Reaching into his watch pocket, he fished out the cut of Brown's Mule and turned it in his hands, looking for a corner to bite from. Then he looked at Tom, while his jaw moved against the tobacco with slow vigorous strokes. The moon lay full in his face, and behind him his shadow soared diagonally upward on the wall of the commissary and across and beyond the slanting roof. After awhile he spoke.

"You want to go with me to the Quarters?"

But Tom had already got up and was moving across the white shining yard to join him, and as he rose, his shadow leapt across the shimmering sand, and mounting the commissary wall, shot across the slanted roof and on beyond.