

James Hines

Will Whomper's

Last Sermon

A STORY

I KNOCKS ON the door of Uncle Will Whomper's cabin at Muddy Water Forks on Skelton Creek. Uncle Will meets me at the door with a gun in his hand.

"Lo, Burlap," he says, as he eases the hammer down on his forty-five. "Come in and jine me in a drink and listen to my sermon I'm a-workin' on."

I follow him into the shanty.

"I'm a Man of God now," says Will. "I'm thru' fightin' them Pryors with guns. Yessir, I'm a Man of God. I'm a-trustin' the Lawd to the limit. He'll give me Power to whip 'em."

Uncle Will is one of them fighting Whomper clansmen who have been having war with the Pryor tribe, who have lived up Skelton Creek, ever since early bunches of both families settled here in Kentucky in 1854.

I sit down on a block of wood that

Will offers me for a seat. Sitting down is a dangerous business. Will has only one chair and it has the back out of it. He has a block of wood turned upside down that serves as chairs for any company that he might have. Uncle Will don't care, as he is an old bachelor.

"Have a sample of my Honorable Herbs?" Will pulls a black and white stone jug from under the bed covers of his bed, holds it up to his ear, shakes it, and hands it to me.

I turn up the jug and take a deep swallow. "This is good licker," I says, smacking my lips. "Make it your ownself?"

"Nawsir," Will says. "Bought it from the Martin boys up Cat Track Hollow."

I light my pipe and take a deep drag of smoke to get the taste of moonshine liquor out of my mouth. I can feel the stuff going down in my insides. It feels like someone is

ramming a hacksaw blade down my throat.

"Yessir," brags Will. "I'm a Man of God now. With the Power of the Lawd, I'll whip them there Pryors in the name of the Speerit. Listen to my sermon here that I writ down yisterday."

Uncle Will takes down two books from the fireboard mantel over the fireplace. He blows the dust off of them. He takes out a piece of brown sack paper from betwixt one of the book's leaves with something writ all over it. The marks look like where children have been playing in the sand. I can tell by the color and the size of one of the books that it is a New Testament.

"Listen to my sermon," Will says.

"Brethern and Sistern . . . Children of God. I takes my text from the forty-seventh chapter in the Episode of St. Petersburg. I ain't afeerd of them damn fightin' Pryors and with your help and guidance, Oh Lawd, I'll whip 'em and hang their hides on the fence. I'm the walkin' Speerit of the land and I walks in the name of God."

He jumps to his feet and shouts:

"Was Daniel afeerd in the Lions' Den? Was the Hebrew Children afeerd of the fiery furnace? Was the Preacher afeerd of the bear? Naw, by hell, they wuzzen't! Ah! They had your Speerit with 'em, Lawd; and that's the reason, by hell, I ain't afeerd of the Pryors."

Will jumps out in the middle of the room and whacks his feet together against the rough oak floor of the cabin. He draws back his fist and hits the wall of the cabin. It pops like the sound of a fired shotgun. "Naw, by hell," he hollers, "I ain't afeerd of the Pryors. I got the Speerit of the Lawd with me, just like Daniel had when he was in the den of lions and God put locks on the lions mouths to keep them from bitin' 'im.

"Yipp-ee-e! Yippee-ee!" yells Will, louder than a holy-roller preacher ever hollered, making the windows in the cabin rattle.

Uncle Will thinks he is already preaching in the church house.

HE POINTS A gnarled, crooked finger at me and asks, as he glares out of wicked, insane looking, green eyes, "What did General Stonewall Jackson say at the Battle of Chickamauga?"

"Stop, stop!" I yells, jumping off the block of wood I'm sitting on and getting back out of his reach. "You've got Bible, history and song all mixed up together. I remember Greatgrandpa a-tellin' me about 'im being with General Stonewall Jackson in the Civil War. Ah knows he couldn't have been living in Bible times and fought in the Civil War, unless he was resurrected from the dead."

"How'd you like my sermon?" Will asks, coming back to normal

once more and sitting down weakly in his chair without a back in it and wiping the sweat from his face that resembles a turkey gobbler's comb, it is so red.

"Too much history in it," I tells him. "Besides, you've got that song Bud Wallace picks on his banjer, *The Preacher and the Bear*, in it. And another thing: you have to be saved by the Grace of God a-fore you can preach. And that ain't all. After you are converted, if the Lord thinks you will make a good man to carry on The Word, he calls you to deliver the Gospel."

HOW DO YOU get saved?" Will asks.

"By goin' to church. There the Speerit of the Lord comes around to you. You ain't been inside of a church house for years. How do you think you're going to come in contact with God? You always stand out in the yard."

"I looks in thru the window at the preacher-man. You knows I ain't got any slippers to wear and now-days men can't be caught out in the open without a pair of them there new-fangled slippers on. I tell you I don't know what in the world this younger generation is a-comin' to. But what I wants to know is, what is a Speerit?"

"That is the Power of the Lord a-visitin' your soul in the form of a Speerit."

"Anyway," says Will, "I done

sent word by Brother Sam Hodges to Preacher Jeeper Backlog this here mornin' that I would holp 'im out with his sermon Saturday night at the Swayback Chapel Church over at Crazy Woman's Forks."

"Oh, my Lordy," I moans. "You can't put all that stuff in your sermon, Uncle Will, about the Lord a-goin' to help you whip the Pryors, 'cause that whole set will be there at the meetin' Saturday night."

"Partake of my Honorable Herbs," says Will in Bible talk, lifting the jug to his lips and letting the strong liquid gurgle down his throat. I watch his Adam's apple bobble up and down. The sound he makes is like that of a roaring, over-flowing creek in February.

"Believe I will sample another drink," I tells Will, taking the jug from his hands, as I hate not to accept Will's drinks.

While I am drinking from the jug, Will starts his sermon again.

"I'll skin them Pryors' hides Saturday night. I'll rip 'em off from the bottoms of their feet to the top of their heads. I'll slit their throats from ear to ear. I'll raise the roof of the meetin' house. It'll be too hot for 'em on the inside. I'll bring 'em to Jesus. Turn or burn!" yells Will. He is beginning to feel the effects of the strong-proof moonshine.

"Turn or burn!" he shouts in a deep voice, shaking the cabin walls. "The Wages of Sin is death! The

Wages of Sin is death!" The windows in the cabin rattle.

"Goodbye," I says to Will, making my retreat while I am all in one piece. "I'll see you at Swayback Church Saturday night. Take care, Uncle Will. Take care."

I do.

SWAYBACK CHAPEL CHURCH stands on a steep hillside. It resembles the curved back of a broken-down saddle horse. The hillsides are a-swarming with people when I get there. Occasionally some drunk lets out a yell and fires his pistol in the air. I can see the splashes of fire fly in the dark night and hear the whistle of bullets as they sing over my head. A hunter's horn blows from a briar thicket on the steep hillside above. "Some of the Horse Branch boys on their way fox huntin' have stopped by for church," I think. "They're up there above the church house takin' a dram."

All the Pryor and Whomper tribes are gathered here. All the country has heard about Brother Will Whomper going to lead church tonight. It seems like everybody is here. Drunks on the outside of the church drink more than they can stand and pass out. Some folks are busy cussing the preacher. Pryors are cussing Whompers and Whompers are cussing Pryors.

Trouble is bound to come when Pryors and Whompers gather together. Some members of the clans

are in the meetin' house with their women and children. But, trouble or no trouble, they always come for miles around for church or dances or anything else.

The last time the Whompers and Pryors tangled was at a Candidates' Barbecue, sponsored by the County officials running for election. As usual, some of the members of the Pryor and Whomper clans were carrying a full load of mountain moonshine.

Zeb Whomper knocked Esseau Pryor's "sun-down" straw hat off his head. This started trouble right there. Fists started flying. There were many members there of both clans and it seemed like everybody had knives, razors, and guns. Before sober members of the tribe and the Sheriff and his deputies could get things quieted down, three people lay dead: Bud and Ace Whomper and Jason Pryor. All of these were the younger members of the clans. Ace Whomper was a mere boy who had not shaved yet.

That day the clansmen cussed each other and vowed to meet again, and swore that when they did there would be hell to pay.

The church house is full. All the benches are filled, and men and boys stand up in the back of the house. Folks sit in the windows, and outside the yard is swarming with people. The church resembles a beehive and the folks resemble bees, as there is so much going on around the house.

The church house has no ceiling. Braces have been nailed crossways of the house to keep a strong wind from blowing it down. Boys have climbed up on these braces which are nailed up over the heads of the crowd. They have a good view of the whole house. The musicians are tuning up their fiddles, banjers, mandolins, guitars, dulcimers, and other kinds of musical instruments.

Preacher Backlog sits back in the corner of the pulpit reading his Bible. Uncle Will is sitting right up front beside the pulpit stand. He looks like the crowd has him charmed — like a cat charms a bird. He has on no shoes. He sets cross-legged in a straight-back chair, wiggling his big, dirty toes. His toes are the only part of him that is moving. I can see yellow mud under his toe nails. They are growed out long and crooked like spurs on a game rooster. Looks to me like he would have taken a fork and cleaned out his long toe nails before coming to church. It says something in the Good Book about keeping clean.

Will has on a new pair of overalls rolled up at the bottoms about a foot. He has on a soiled white shirt with a twisted red necktie. "Uncle Will's been a-washin' his white shirt in cold crick water agin," I thought. His hair sticks up on his egg-shape head like an old rag mop. That is because he has always been use to wearing a hat and not combing his hair. His black beard bristles like a

hound dog on a scent of a piece of hog meat.

After Sister Dimmersdale has led prayer and the musicians play and sing *When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder*, with the folks joining in, Preacher Backlog takes the floor and says:

"Bretherin' and Sisters, we are gathered here tonight to hear the Word of God. Tonight we have with us a man you all have knowed many years, Brother Will Whomper. As you all knows, Brother Will has been one of the meanest sinners in the whole crick bottom country. Now the Lawd has worked one of his many miracles and saved Brother Will by His Grace, and he has been called to serve the Lawd, to preach the Gospel. Now I am turnin' the sermon over to Brother Whomper."

I WISH UNCLE WILL had the four days growth of beard shaved offen his face. I would like to see the color of his face. I can see nothing but his forehead, and little beads of sweat is standing out on it like dew on a blade of corn in the early summer morn.

After Preacher Backlog says his final words, he sits down on the mourner's bench facing the pulpit box. I am sitting two seats behind him.

Brother Whomper gets weakly to his feet and goes to the pulpit, laying his New Testament on the pulpit box. He yells out in a loud voice

which makes the tin roof of the meetin' house rattle.

"All right, everybody. Let's have that ol' song that for many years I cussed."

Uncle Will claps his hands and stomps his feet, and we all join in and sing the old-time religious song, *I'll Fly Away in Glory*.

After the song is sung, everybody is so quiet that you can hear a pin drop in the house, if one drops. Even on the outside everybody is quiet, including the hound dogs and the drunks, waiting to hear what Brother Whomper is going to say.

"Bretherin' and Sisters — Children of God," Uncle Will clears his throat. "I'm here armed with the Power of the Lawd to knock the Devil out of you. I'm here for one purpose alone and that is to indict sin. I comes up here to peel your hides — to skin you alive. You all are suckers to live for Ol' Satan. Come out for Jesus! Come out for Jesus! Come out for Jesus, everybody, including thine enemies who are present."

At the mention of enemies there is a nervous movement in the house, followed by the sound of scraping feet on the floor and benches being pushed back. Uncle Will is getting on slippery ground, but he preaches all the harder.

". . . Then were the days of peace and prosperity. Friends, I thank the Lawd tonight that I'm on the Glory Bound train, on that road

to the city of the golden streets. Ah! I'm so happy tonight with the love of Christ in my heart, ah! I'm just so happy that I could beat all hell out of the Pryors! Didn't St. Peter hit his brother Cain over the head with a fence slat and knock the hell out of 'im for not doing what he wanted 'im to do? Didn't little David take his slingshot and sailing rocks and go out to meet that big giant? He protected him and his folks from the enemy. The Lawd was behind 'im. Well, now, the Pryors . . ."

A PRYOR RAISES to his feet in the back of the house, but a hand pulls him back down.

"Sinners!" Uncle Will shouts. "You go to hell! Er' . . . 'er . . . I mean you sinners are going to hell." Uncle Will stutters a little bit and he becomes more excited. "Fill up your lamps," he continues. "Yessir, fill up the lamps of life. Keep 'em trim and burning. Git ready to move up yander above." He points his hand toward the rafters in the church. "Yessir, git ready to leave this ol' sinful world. I'm a-gittin' ready to move to Heaven in a chariot of fire, like the prophet Elijah done."

"I hope you have a nice jaunt," yells a half-drunk Pryor.

Uncle Will does not pay any attention to what the Pryor says. He keeps right on preaching, talking so fast that his words get mixed up more and more all the time. Some-

times you can tell what he is talking about and other times his voice deafens you, he yells so loud.

Will jumps up and down, whacking his feet together and hitting his hands on the pulpit box. He jumps down from the pulpit stand and runs down the aisle and back, between the two rows of people. As he runs down the aisle, a Pryor hits at him with a pair of brass knucks and another tries to trip him; but Uncle Will is too quick for them and jumps out of the way.

He gets back in the pulpit again. He runs around in circles, preaching all the time. He jumps from the old Bible to the New Testament. He only knows a few words from the Bible, so he preaches over the entire book. Uncle Will shouts: "I can whip the Pryors just like the mighty Samson slew the Philistines with the ass of a jawbone!"

THE PRYORS are getting about all they can stand of Will's sermon, as you can tell by the strained look on their faces. Burt Pryor takes out a bottle of white corn moonshine whiskey and takes a swag and passes it across in front of his galfriend to his brother who is sitting on the other side of his gal. His brother takes a drink and passes it to another Pryor, and in turn the bottle is passed until a Pryor empties it and throws the bottle in the middle of the church house floor. It bursts and broken glass flies all over the room.

"Better save that bottle to refill," growls Ol' Anse Pryor, leader of the Pryor clansmen, sitting in the back of the house with his fourteen-year-old wife.

Ordinarily the clansmen would have gone outside to drink their whiskey, but they are so worked up over Will's sermon that they don't give a hoot.

Outside, one of the drunk Pryor clansmen who is about past going, yells out in a loud voice:

"Hoorah, hoorah, for a damned twenty-eight model Ford. I hear Brother Avery Goff Pryor a-comin' in from the Hoss Crick bottoms with a car load of good licker. Who wants to buy some? Step right up, gents, and pay your money now. If you ain't got any money, I'll take hens or eggs, a good plug of chawin' ter-backer or anything else you got for a body to trade. I'm everybody's friend tonight, 'ceptin' anything that has got Whomper blood in it." He yells again, and everyone in the church can hear him as plain as day. "Pay your money, gents, and drink good licker. Then us Pryors can whip the damn Whompers! See this fist," he yells. "It can whip a damned field of Whompers itself. It ain't never failed me yet." He shakes his fists in the air. "Thisn' iron, thisn' steel . . . thisn' can't do it, thisn' will," he hiccups and gets to walking backwards and falls to the ground where he lays still.

Inside the house, people are pour-

ing out the doors and windows. Everybody is in a mad scramble. The sweat is pouring off Uncle Will. His soiled white shirt is wringing wet, like he has been thrown in a swimmin' hole in July with his clothes on.

Uncle Will is preaching hellfire and brimstone.

"I come here tonight in the name of the Lawd, the Great God, and I can whip anything in the name of the Lawd, including the whole blasted Pryor set." He cannot resist answering the Pryor yells that he hears on the outside.

The Pryors empty another bottle of white corn liquor and throw the bottle toward a window of the church. It misses going out the window and hits the wall. Pieces of glass fly everywhere, all over everyone. A Whomper takes all he can stand and jumps to his feet. He'll learn the Pryors to show a little respect for his kinfolks who are trying to preach the Holy Word. A Pryor instantly jumps to his feet. Soon all the Pryors and Whompers are getting to their feet. Everyone is in a mad scramble. Men are yelling, women and children screaming. Outside, a bunch of hound dogs get into a fight. Pryors and Whompers tangle up, overturning benches and upsetting the old cast iron stove, which stays in the church house the year round. The water bucket is overturned. Someone shoots out one of the two lights, and that just leaves a dim coal oil lamp to light

the house. You can't tell who is fighting who, and nobody seems to care.

"Take that, damn ye!" yells one Pryor gleefully, as he rams his fist up to the elbow in one fat Whomper's belly. "I told ye the last time we met at that barbecue I would git even with ye."

UP AT THE PULPIT Uncle Will Whomper is struggling with a big double-fisted, red-bearded Pryor who has his claw-like hands around Will's neck and is choking the living daylight out of him. Uncle Will is beating him over the head with his Bible. Will breaks loose and knocks the Pryor to the floor with a fist that is hard as a seasoned white oak knot. The floored Pryor jumps up with a pair of brass knucks in his hand and hits Preacher Whomper on the side of the jaw, breaking his jawbone. Another Whomper comes to the rescue of Will and hits the Pryor over the head with a piece of oak plank that has been torn off one of the church house benches in the tussle. The Pryor is laid out cold.

The Model A Ford pulls up to the meeting house with a crash, as the radiator is loose and the fan is knocking against it. It has one tire flat, the only good tire on it. The other tires are filled with sawdust in special sewed sacks in the place of inner tubes. Someone toots the horn in the car. A bunch of drunk Pryors is in the car singing *Bully of the*

Town. Jarfly Pryor is sitting in the back seat of the car plunking on his banjer. The sound the banjer makes is like that of a rusty saw in a knot-hole. The Pryors in the car begin firing their guns when they come to the passage in the song, "I'm looking for the bully; the bully can't be found."

Inside the meeting place the fight is about over. They have fought until they have given out. Somebody screams, "Enough, enough! The damned Sheriff's here with his deputies. Let's git outen here!"

"And the quickest way is too damn slow!" yells a deputy.

A Pryor lies with a bullet in his guts, just about dead. He is cussing the Whompers for all they are worth and making a feeble effort with his hands, trying to get a bottle of liquor lying within arm's reach of him. Blood seeps out the corners of his mouth. On both sides several members are knocked out cold and passed out drunk. Whompers and Pryors tear off down through the bushes. Both sides hate and despise the Law. More than one Pryor and Whomper has served a stretch in prison or lain in the county jail for months for fighting, thieving, and making and selling moonshine liquor.

PROBABLY SOME Whomper or Pryor with good intentions had sent word to the Sheriff about the meeting, but he arrived almost too

late to prevent the fight. But he was lucky to arrive when he did, as many more Whompers and Pryors would have gotten hurt.

Uncle Will Whomper forgets his Bible in his hasty retreat. He runs over someone as he tears off thru a briar thicket at breakneck speed. Uncle Will falls over the top of a man and rams his pistol barrel in the ground. "Don't sh — shoot, don't shoot," moans the man. "It's me, pore Preacher Backlog. I never done nobody any harm. I'm just getting away from that House of God that has turned into a Devil's party."

After almost all of the fighting Whompers and Pryors have gone, the Sheriff and one of his deputies set a brush pile afire in the meeting house yard. Several Whompers and Pryors lie stretched about the yard in the circle of the firelight.

One of the deputies says, "Looks like we got here too late to prevent this fight." He pours a bucket of water on an unconscious Pryor. "I believe this is Byers Pryor," he says, bending over and looking closely at the bloody face. "I've been a-waitin' to catch 'im fer a long time. He put a cake of soap in one of his socks and hit my brother Anderson over the head and escaped from the county jail last summer."

"Yep, that's Byers Pryor," another deputy says. "He's the one who sold that watered moonshine."

"We might as well take those to jail and leave that half-dead Pryor

here," the Sheriff says. "The set will be back after him sometime. No use a-tryin' to chase that bunch down from out there in the fields and thickets. They'd have so many witnesses on each side that it would be useless to try and convict 'em. That's how Ol' Sheriff Earp Gums got kilt, by a-goin' back in one of them hollows to arrest a Whomper fer a-stillin' licker. But fer these here we have all the evidence we need, and evidence is high proof."

"By hell!" screams a Pryor from

out in the bushes. "We'll git even with you Whompers yet. We'll git ye! You kilt my brother!"

THAT NIGHT I stays with Uncle Will and helps him tie up his broken jawbone.

"I'll never preach another sermon, Burlap Skinner," groans Will, "as long as I live. The only way to fight that damn Pryor tribe is with guns!" Uncle Will has forgotten his religion already. "Give me a snort outta my jug!" he hollers.

Baruch on Truman

Bernard Baruch has been called the Elder Statesman of the Democratic Party. As such here are his principal pronouncements on the present administration:

Truman is a rude, uncouth, vulgar man.¹

The inflation that has racked this country with such injury to those with fixed incomes and wages has not been the result of do-nothing economics. It has come from government-managed economics; from government favoritism to certain pressure groups in disregard of the national interest.²

The way to protect human rights is not to socialize them. . . . The chief threat to human rights is no longer of too little government. Freedom's greatest threat today is too much government.³

In foreign policy we continue to stagger from crisis to crisis, with the initiative left to the enemy.⁴

If American fiscal policy becomes a perpetual inflation machine — as "deficit financing" would make it — the result will be to enslave us to the government.⁵

We cannot arm against incompetence in government. We can only extirpate it.⁶

(¹: *To the press, October, 1948*; ^{2, 3, 4, 5}: *Address, City College, New York, May 11, 1950*; ⁶: *Address, Washington University, St. Louis, June 6, 1950*.)

In Our Readers' Opinion

A Criticism from Hungary

This month our Readers' Opinion Department is given over in its entirety to a thorough-going appraisal of THE MERCURY from behind the Iron Curtain. It originally appeared September 27, 1951, in Budapest in the Irodalmi Ujság (Literary News), the official publication of the Magyar Írók Szövetségének (Hungarian Writer's Union). This specimen of Communist invective was picked up and translated by Robert Meisner.

THE EDITORS

THE AMERICAN MERCURY is one of the most influential periodicals in the United States. It is by no means a comic book or a scandal sheet whose cover is disgraced with pictures of nude prostitutes or bloody gangster heroes. It has a conservative appearance — completely opposite to the American taste.

In the August issue, the latest to reach us, THE MERCURY openly states on page 124: "THE MERCURY is not written and edited for the people. The people don't read it. It is written for those few who prefer to think." Obviously THE MERCURY is

the journal for the cream of the American elite whose members not only despise all other nations but turn their backs in open disgust on their own unprivileged brothers, the American people.

Let's take a better look at this noble organ of those cornerstones of American culture, the drawing rooms of Washington and New York. The first article is entitled "Homosexuality in American Culture," and the table of contents lists such other features as these: "Gangsterism in Night Clubs," in which a famous singer by the name of Frank Sinatra reports "confidentially" on how he was started on his career by a group of gangsters; "In the Chains of Alcoholism," in which Armand Kashmanian, a Chicago criminal now serving a 15-year sentence, offers a colorful "psychological" essay on the development of his personality; and "Wolves and Night Flies," which describes the life of American youth in Greenwich Village.

Then what do Americans call pornography and filthy literature,