

## Last Whipping

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When I went by his house one Sunday morning to pick up my Kodak that he had borrowed, Simple was standing in the middle of the floor in his shirttail imitating a minister winding up his Sunday morning sermon, gestures and all.

He intoned, “Well, I looked and I saw a great beast! And that great beast had its jaws open ready to clamp down on my mortal soul. But I knowed if it was to clamp, ah, my soul would escape and go to glory. Amen! So I was not afraid. My body was afraid, a-a-ah, but my soul was not afraid. My soul said whatsoever you may do to my behind, a-a-ah, beast, you *cannot* harm my soul. Amen! No, Christians! That beast *cannot* tear your immortal soul. That devil in the form of a crocodile, the form of a alligator with a leather hide that slippeth and slideth through the bayous swamp—that alligator *cannot* tear your soul!”

“You really give a good imitation of a preacher,” I said. “But come on and get dressed and let’s go, since you say you left my Kodak at Joyce’s. I didn’t stop by here to hear you preach.”

“I am saying that to say this,” said Simple, “because that is the place in the sermon where my old Aunt Lucy jumped up shouting and leapt clean across the pulpit rail and started to preaching herself, right along with the minister.

“She hollered, ‘No-ooo-oo-o! Hallelujah, no! It cannot tear your soul. Sometimes the devil comes in human form,’ yelled Aunt Lucy, ‘sometimes it be’s born right into your own family. Sometimes the devil be’s your own flesh and kin—and he try your soul—but your soul he cannot tear! Sometimes you be’s forced to tear his hide *before* he tears your soul. Amen!’

“Now, Aunt Lucy were talking about *me* that morning when she said ‘devil.’ That is what I started to tell you.”

“Talking about you, why?” I asked.

“Because I had been up to some devilment, and she had done said she was gonna whip me come Monday. Aunt Lucy were so Christian she did not believe in whipping nobody on a Sunday.”

“What had you done?”

“Oh, I had just taken one of her best laying hens and give it to a girl who didn’t even belong to our church; to roast for her Sunday school picnic, because this old girl said she was aiming to picnic *me*—except that she didn’t have nothing good to eat to put in her basket. I was trying to jive this old gal, you know—I was young—so I just took one of Aunt Lucy’s hens and give her.”

“Why didn’t you pick out a pullet that wasn’t laying?”

“That hen was the biggest, fattest chicken in the pen—and I wanted that girl to have plenty to pull out of her basket at that picnic so folks would make a great big admiration over her and me.”

“How did your Aunt Lucy find out about the hen?”

“Man, you know womenfolks can’t keep no secret! That girl told another girl, the other girl told her cousin, the cousin told her mama, her mama told Aunt Lucy—and Aunt Lucy woke me up Sunday morning with a switch in her hand.”

“Weren’t you too old to be whipped by then?”

“Of course, I was too old to whip—sixteen going on seventeen, big as a ox. But Aunt Lucy did not figure I was grown yet. And she took her duty hard—because she always said the last thing my mother told her when she died was to raise me right.”

“What did you do when you saw the switch?”

“Oh, I got all mannish, man. I said, ‘Aunt Lucy, you ain’t gonna whip me no more. I’s a man—and you ain’t gonna whip me.’”

“Aunt Lucy said, ‘Yes, I is, too, Jess. I will whip you until you gets grown enough to know how to act like a man—not just *look* like one. You know you had no business snatching my hen right off her nest and giving it to that low-life hussy what had no better sense than to take it, knowing you ain’t got nowhere to get no hen except out of *my* henhouse. Were this not Sunday, I would whale you in a inch of your life before you could get out of that bed.’”

“Aunt Lucy was angry,” I commented.

“She was,” said Simple. “And big as I was, I was scared. But I was meaning not to let her whip me, even if I had to snatch that sapling out of her hand.”

“So what happened on Monday morning?”

“Aunt Lucy waited until I got up, dressed, and washed my face. Then she called me. ‘Jess!’ I knowed it were whipping time. Just when I was aiming to snatch that switch out of her hand, I seed that Aunt Lucy was crying when she told me to come there. I said, ‘Aunt Lucy, what you crying for?’”

“She said, ‘I am crying ’cause here you is a man, and don’t know how to act right yet, and I done did my best to raise you so you would grow up good. I done wore out so many switches on your back, still you tries my soul. But it ain’t *my* soul I’m thinking of, son, it’s yourn. Jess, I wants you to carry yourself right and ’sociate with peoples what’s decent and be a good boy. You understand me? I’s getting too old to be using my strength like this. Here!’ she hollered, ‘bend over and lemme whip you one more time!’”

“Did she whip you?”

“She whipped me—because I bent,” said Simple. “When I seen her crying, I would have let her kill me before I raised my hand. When she got through, I said, ‘Aunt Lucy, you ain’t gonna have to whip me no more. I ain’t gonna give you no cause. I do not mind to be beat. But I do not *never* want to see you cry no more—so I am going to do my best to do right from now on and not try your soul. And I am sorry about that hen.’”

“And you know, man, from that day to this, I have tried to behave myself. Aunt Lucy is gone to glory this morning, but if she is looking down, she knows that is true. That was my last whipping. But it wasn’t the whipping that taught me what I needed to know. It was because she cried—and cried. When peoples care for you and cry for you, they can straighten out your soul. Ain’t that right, boy?”

“Yes,” I said, “that’s right.”