

A TOWN IN THE PINES

BY M. S. LEA

ACROSS the northern part of Louisiana, set in fringes of dark pine forest and pastures of post oak, there lies a belt of open country that is dreary, forbidding and desolate. A large part of its sustenance is derived from the adjacent lumber. In its smaller towns there are people who are wealthy, as wealth goes in that part of the South, but few of them know anything outside the narrow range of the jargon which serves them for English. Each man lives like his brother. Class lines are negligible or nonexistent. Long ago, in the days of local option, their ardor for Prohibition was their chief distinction, seeming a little flamboyant in its single assertiveness, like a painted cock feather in a buffoon's bedraggled hat.

During the Winter of 1909 I left New Orleans, where I was an art student, and became a teacher in the one school in one of these diminutive communities. I found a town of possibly two thousand people set in unkempt, sterile looking country where aimless, deep-rutted, red clay roads lost themselves in gullies that were tangles of hog vine and sickly wild-flower roots; where slovenly frame-houses were placed at random in uncaring disarray about a center composed of a bank, a drug-store, an "emporium" and a pool-room, with lesser marts packed between; where a circular faced building strung about with electric lights bore the words Opera House in bright letters above its grimy white doorway.

At a turn of the main road a path ran downhill and ended in a mud flat in the middle of which stood the school-house. This was a large, two-story building of

weather-beaten shingles, guiltless of any sort of care. If it had ever had any paint on it, it must have been green, for here and there green patches appeared on its walls. But maybe these were lichen. By the left wall an open stairway ran up to the second story and opened into a classroom in which I used to give a number of the lower grades drawing lessons. Some of the drawing-books which had been ordered in August had not come, although the month was January, and I was put to it to find material for them to use. I used to pick up dead leaves and carry them in with me and pin them to cards which I set up on desks for everyone to see. The lower grades drew the leaves pinned to the cards very badly. I would go up one aisle and down the other endeavoring to set them right.

"A leaf couldn't look like that!" I would cry, and, "A leaf couldn't look like that!"

They would wipe their noses on their ragged sleeves and fret to know what a leaf could look like. I would go out into the frozen mud of the roadway and return with a double handful, giving one to each student, and saying, "Hold it in one hand, so—and draw it with the other—so!" But the lower grades, with sly looks, propped books open in front of their papers and drew lines around the edges of the leaves. So I gave them something to draw from memory: the sugar bowls in their homes. They made a very fair thing of it. But one of the largest boys, when I came to look at his paper, had no lid on his bowl. I sat down beside him; he smelled of earth and soiled underclothes, and the clothes he wore outside were filthy. I told him to

draw his lid, but he would not. He sat turning in the toes of his shoes and scraping them on the iron legs of his desk.

"Put the lid on your sugar bowl," I scolded him.

He looked at me as if I were some sort of a ghost, as if I were not there, and said, "I cain't."

"Can't you remember what it looks like?" I fumed. He made a sullen, negative motion without speaking. He rubbed smutty places around the edge of his paper with a dirty eraser. I drew a number of lids for him, trying to recall the shape to his mind.

"Is it like this?" I begged. "Or this, or this?" He shook his head, and I drew another. So I drew all the possible lids that could belong to a sugar bowl like his, but after awhile he said in a complaining voice, "Hit's broke."

II

The principal of the school explained to me that the children must be ruled with a hard hand. "You're too good to them," he said. "You reason with them and try to explain to them what you're trying to do. Now, children in these parts ain't like what you think. They don't understand kindness. I've been teachin' here a good many years and I know. Do you see that boy over there? I'm going to beat him this afternoon and beat him plenty. At home when his mother wants him to mind she hits him with a stick of wood."

It was impossible to gainsay this if you had acquaintance with the Widow Stringer. The Widow Stringer was the relict of the man who had built the Stringer House, the travelling man's hotel. She managed it now in his stead, conducting its affairs and the affairs of her nine children with acumen and efficiency. She was, within, a woman of sterling goodness, but there was something summary in her management.

"Jim Stringer," she would say grimly to her youngest, "I 'low ef'n you don't git out'n this room I'll bus' you open with this pine stick!"

I never saw her put her threat into effect, but Jim always went with alacrity, giving the slip to a bloody end.

If I had a pet in the school, it was the little girl whose father kept a blacksmith shop. On St. Valentine's Day I found her waiting for me at the turn of the road where the path ran downhill to the school-house. She had on a faded dress with a ragged petticoat hanging below it and her coat had all the lint rubbed off the threads. She wore a scarlet Tam o' Shanter but it wasn't becoming because her face was little and blue and her nose was sharp and had a dark tip. She had an envelope in her hand and she kept it behind her.

"Did y' git any valentines?" she asked, when I had told her good morning.

"Not any," I said, and tried to look pleasant about it. I thought that she seemed to gloat over me when I told her, she had such a curious pride. Smile she would not, and I saw that to her a valentine was not a smiling matter.

"I didn't get even one," I said. "It's my birthday, too."

I hoped that she would feel sorry for me then. She drew her hand from behind her and her thumb was through a hole in her mitten, but she had no shame about it. She thrust it into the envelope and drew out a small scarlet heart with a blue bird on it. She drew out a tiny wreath of flowers with "To My Valentine" on it. She drew out a torn lace doily with a pair of lovers on it. She held them up to me but she kept her face turned straight ahead as if she wanted me to know that it was all a matter of indifference to her; as if she had lived too long to do more than humor a fellow being in the matter of a valentine. Then she said, still without smiling, "Take yer pick!"

A Negro family lived just behind the school and there were a lot of children in it and a number of them had smallpox. You could see their plaintive brown faces looking out through the dirty window panes, and a Negro woman used to come out of the house and hang blankets on a

clothes-line in the yard to air. Smallpox was all through the town, but there wasn't any pest-house and nobody would be vaccinated. The townspeople said that if they got it they would put lard on their skins, and that that would keep it from leaving any marks. Those who contracted it stayed indoors if they wanted to, but they weren't quarantined. I went to the postoffice to get my mail and the postmaster had it all over his face. I asked the superintendent of the school why such a state of things was permitted and he looked upon me hostilely and said, "Tell you. The town council here ain't got any money. Guess they'd put up a pest-house if they had any, but the city's poor. Same thing about quarantining. They ain't got health officers to see to it. And people around these parts don't take much to vaccinating anyhow since old Miss Banner down yonder a piece she died of cancer."

He had not time to explain his remark and I was obliged to ask its meaning of the Widow Stringer. "I calc'late you wouldn't know her," she said. "She lived down yonder by the railroad tracks. 'Tain't a year sence she got a risin' on her arm right where she was vaccinated when she was a little girl. Dr. McGraw he said as how it had give her cancer, an' now she's dead. 'Tain't likely people are goin' to take up with sech business after hearin' her tell afore she died how come hit."

I used to look forward to Sundays. On Sundays I went horseback riding in the woods with a girl from the high-school division named Onie. She had a great many freckles and a tilted up nose and she was forever collapsing like a waterfall in a cascade of laughter. "Onie, sit up!" I would beg. "Onie . . .!"

Onie, who had come to Louisiana from Texas, was no coward about riding. She would lie flat against her horse's neck, letting her body slip to frighten me. I would gallop at her side holding the pommel of my saddle with both hands. "Onie . . . please, Onie!" The frost on the ground was black and the pine needles were brown

and black. Only on the trees they were bright green. Sharp brown burrs showed between them and smears of brittle resin streaked the gray scales of the tree trunks. Sometimes flying squirrels shot across between limbs high above our heads and on clear days you could hear crows and blue jays calling to each other from the stubble in the cornfields fringing the town. The feet of the horses crunched and splintered the frozen ground. The north wind spread itself over our faces in a fine cold like ice.

The town was very quiet on Sundays. The women stayed in their houses and cooked heavy noonday meals of fried chicken and salt shoulder and cabbage, of hominy grits and boiled potatoes and thick saleratus biscuits. Or they went in clusters of twos and threes to the churches, taking their children, whose faces had been scoured and whose clothes had been mended and laundered for the occasion. There was an almost tangible silence like cobwebs over everything. Dogs barked and hens cackled, but the people walked with a stealthy tread and even the voices of the children sounded metallic and disembodied when they spoke. The Widow Stringer would fall into thoughts of her tenth child, who was now only a curious kind of memory, for she had come upon him one morning when he was very little, standing drowned and upside down in the washtub, which she had prepared beside the kitchen doorstep for the clothes.

There were few men to be seen on the streets after Saturday noon. At about that time they would polish their shoes until they shone and put lotions on their hair to keep it smooth and take the train and go to Alexandria. This was their Babylon, and they revelled there, securely lost in its cosmopolitan ambiguity, until they returned home at midnight of Sunday. The actors at the Opera House, who played vaudeville each evening after the moving picture had been shown, made jokes about it. One of them would go behind the curtain and kick down a lot of boxes and tin cans and throw them all around the stage,

after which he would come back and say to the other one, winking, "Guess what that was!"

"What was it?" the second man would respond curiously.

"The Prohibition party from this town coming back from Alexandria!"

Then everybody would clap and kick on the floor, and the men in the audience would poke each other in the ribs and laugh until the actors had left the stage.

III

The Opera House was dark and stale-smelling and the seats were heavy wooden benches without any divisions. The people would begin to crowd in from the town at half past six o'clock. The children came tumbling over each other, each one shoving to get ahead, and their shoes were caked with mud and dust and they chewed gum and peanuts. The older boys and girls came together, wearing bright neckties and dresses, and the boys sucking violet breath-drops to give themselves an elegant odor. But the fathers and mothers came straight from the fields and kitchens, and brought the very little children who were too young to come alone.

Every week a cheap theatrical troupe arrived from Alexandria and played at the Opera House, and one week there was a young girl who was a hypnotist, so that all the town turned out to see her. To advertise her act the manager put her in one of the shop windows of the town the morning she arrived, and she was supposed to be in a trance herself, although no one explained who it was that had hypnotized her. She lay full length on the floor of the window in a white dress with a blue sash. Everybody said she wasn't more than seventeen years old. Her hands were folded on her breast and a half-grown boy with high white canvas shoes sat behind her and fanned her to keep the flies away. When they lit on her hands her eyelashes quivered but she didn't move, which caused the people on the sidewalk to wonder at

the mysterious science that made her sleep so hard.

That night the playhouse was crowded. She came out on the stage with her white dress all starched and ruffled and asked six boys between the ages of fourteen and sixteen to come up on the stage and let her hypnotize them. She was as pretty as a fluttery little bird, and as sweet as a posy of mignonette. All of the boys in the audience tried to go up on the stage at once but she chose six, just as she had said. The boy with the high white shoes was sitting in a chair, and beside it were six other chairs, all of them empty. She took the boys from the town and led them one at a time to these seats, smiling and blowing kisses over her shoulder to the audience as she walked. She sat them down very carefully, saying that she would hypnotize them without speaking.

At a snap of her fingers they all fell to their hands and knees and began to bark like dogs. They grovelled around for some time on all fours and then sat up on their haunches and begged. She said that she had just willed them to be dogs. She made them do any number of queer things, she put them through all manner of nonsense, and each time without a single boy failing to obey her. She did this for six nights, each time with six different boys, and it wasn't until she had left town that they told on her. "She said," they explained, "'Watch the boy with the white shoes and do just like he does, *please!* And don't tell or they'll run me out of town.'" Not one had told—not to anyone, at least, who would run her out of town.

After she had gone an old time barn-storming company came which advertised that it would play "The Devil." The title drew a good many people. The stage was shallow and a length of unbleached muslin sheeting was hung across it to serve for a back drop. This left a narrow strip of floor, which was set with a shabby washstand, without much paint, on top of which stood a flowered wash-bowl and pitcher. A wooden garden settee was

placed across from it, and between them, parallel with the footlights, was a paper bedroom screen. The actors bowed, when they came out, to the little man from the livery stable who played the mechanical piano. There were only two of them at first, a man and a woman who sat on the settee and held hands and talked. When they had talked for a while they came closer together and put their arms about each other and kissed each other very loud and long.

The first time they kissed a terrifying face with sinister streaks painted on it and paper horns fastened to the head rose above the screen and made horrible grimaces, pointing to the two on the stage, snickering into its hands and wiggling its scalp and ears up and down as children do who wish to terrify their less accomplished juniors. At each appearance of this apparition the couple on the bench sprang apart and hid their faces in their fingers, peering between them at the audience, which shouted and stamped its applause. Only the babies didn't like it. You could hear them whimpering to their mothers and crying to go home. The house was dirty and dark and the streaks on the devil's face were green and blue. Even to an informed mind he had an unearthly look.

One little girl of three was frightened by his antics out of all seemliness of behavior. Two places removed from her mother, who had brought her brood of eleven to the show with her, she broke suddenly into an unearthly wail. There was an angry, startled exclamation from her older brother and a man sitting behind the row gave vent to a muffled guffaw, for there could be heard above the shuffling of restless feet a sound like the whisper of gentle rain. The devil rose from behind the screen, and, sensing a situation to his liking, made an obscene face. Boys and girls giggled and adjusted their collars or bit the corners of their handkerchiefs. Only the voice of the drowsing mother of eleven arose, indifferent to the commotion.

"Het, set away from Sister! Sam, pick up yer feet!"

Silence fell once more as the row readjusted itself and gave its attention to the drama.

IV

Old wives' tales had them. They could prove their truth out of their own experience. There was, for example, the story of the beautiful child born to the ugliest man in town and his homely wife. She, it seemed, was feverishly desirous of having a handsome baby. She went each day before its birth and gazed long and intently upon the photograph of the handsomest man in the community, on display in the local camera man's window. Her husband sympathized with her in this scheme, for she had told him that it would surely work the miracle. And the town sympathized, too, and watched her with interest. Two such plain mortals, it felt sure, could never produce offspring it could tolerate looking upon unless some such forethought by the mother molded it marvellously. So everyone rejoiced when a son was born to her the image of the photograph. The tale lives in their annals today, their humble contribution to science.

There were few fancy women in the town, but some of the more independent among those who worked were said to be kept. One of them lived in a low, gray house covered with moonflower vines, and in the late afternoon you could see her, dressed in fresh organdie with black velvet ribbons, peering out between the heavy leaves looking for someone. After a while a thin, dapper man with a flat head would come down the street and turn in at the gate. He walked with a springy step and always bowed politely to her when he was half way up the walk, holding his hat in a hand which had a big gold ring on it. He had gone to see her at exactly that same hour every afternoon for ten years, and everyone wondered what she would do when she found out that he was going to marry the little blonde girl who worked

behind the soda-fountain in Smith's drug-store. The townspeople were very respectful when they spoke of her, however, and they often asked him how she was and called her Miss Judy.

Gossip, to be retailed among them, had to be painted in crude, bright colors; so broad was the fiber of their everyday lives that no slighter contrast was felt. They were tolerant of it when it was raw and bold, relishing its humor and retailing it with gusto. And so the story of the horse that would have been loved of Boccaccio was told beside every hearthstone with ribald relish. This horse was the one well-cared-for animal in the livery stable. He was kept sleek and well fed because on Sundays the traveling men stopping at the Stringer House hired him, with a high, red-wheeled trap, to take the town girls

riding. These rides usually ended at dusk, when the girls had to return home to help get the family supper. The horse, too, was accustomed to take regular meals, since he had to be cosseted to keep him the *pièce de résistance* of the livery trade. He wasn't any ordinary hack. You couldn't see a bone in his smooth, sorrel body, and he knew the Stringer House and that it was usually his port of call on Sunday afternoons.

He came back there one Sunday at supper time, leaving a peripatetic swain and his buxom companion somewhere in the pine woods, and dragging reins that apparently had been too lightly tethered to detain him when he became restive for his oats. He returned to stand patiently before the little fly-specked hotel with part of a hussy's garments plainly and scandalously visible on the floor of the trap!

DOYERS STREET

BY HERBERT ASBURY

DOYERS street is a crooked little thoroughfare that runs twistingly, up hill and down, from Chatham Square to Pell street, and with Pell and Mott streets forms New York's Chinatown. In a darkened basement at No. 3, in the house that is reputed to be the one that Anthony H. Doyer built in 1809, there lived not many years ago an ancient Chinaman, by name Ah Quong, an hereditary member of the Four Brothers tong. Although he violated the laws of the white devils by an occasional dicker in opium, Ah Quong was a scholar and a musician; by day he quoted sonorously from the *Analects of Confucius*, and, in consideration of a few cents to replenish his rice bowl, played on his one-stringed fiddle the song of "The Babbling Brook at Sunrise, and the Scent of the Lotus Flower." To Occidental ears the babbling of the brook was discordant, but to the ears of Ah Quong it was music more melodious than the tunes of Johann Strauss.

But by night the fiddle was silent and the wisdom of Confucius remained unspoken, for Ah Quong searched for treasure that he might return to Canton and accomplish a fitting death and burial amid the bones of his ancestors. Night after night he dug in the earthen floor of his dwelling, and went from wall to wall tapping the bricks with a hammer, searching for the \$35,000,000 in gold which a preposterous legend of Doyers street has it was buried by one of the early Doyers in the walls of his house. The vastness of the sum belies the tale, but Ah Quong did not doubt its truth; he had it from a grinning white devil in exchange for one tael of opium. But despite his industry he died before he

could find the gold, so that it must still be there waiting for the man whose joss has blessed him with better luck.

The legend of the Doyers street treasure has popped up at intervals in New York for the past seventy-five years, but while the amount has always been exactly \$35,000,000, it has not always been in gold. Those who, unlike Ah Quong, have been able to envision the space required for the storage of such a huge quantity of metal, relate the tale of a vast estate left by one of the old Doyer family, and every so often an heir appears, speaks his little piece, and then vanishes when he learns that the records of the Public Administrator do not show the existence of such a fortune. The latest claimants were M. and Mme. Tacoen of Ostend and M. and Mme. Tjoens of Loubaix, representing thirty-four Belgian and French heirs. They announced in Paris early in 1923 that they were sailing immediately to claim the estate, which they said was left by "D. B. Doyers, who died in 1865." A later dispatch from Cherbourg said that the estate was that of "Dr. Pierre Doyers, who died in 1835." But the claimants never actually got to this country.

Doyers street has always been something of an orphan thoroughfare. The histories and handbooks of early New York ignore it, except to mention that it is a part of Chinatown, and there does not appear to be any record of how and for whom it was named. The Curator of the Museum of the City of New York expressed the opinion some years ago that it had been named for the same Anthony H. Doyer who built a house at No. 3, and, after living there a long time, moved over into Hudson street.