

# LOVE AFFAIR

BY LOWRY CHARLES WIMBERLY

HETTIE KATE fished below the dam until late afternoon before she caught anything. And then it was only a little bullhead. It had run with the line like a good-sized fish, and when she pulled it from the water the two men across the creek began laughing. They were Negroes. One of them was yellow and a good deal bigger than the other. The little one was black. A third one, a hunchback, had just now set his lines and left. "Shut your damn mouths," Hettie Kate said. The fish was still swinging from her line out over the stream. It wasn't more than three inches long. Hettie was big and husky, her body filling out her blue dress so that it was too tight on her.

The Negroes kept on laughing, and Hettie Kate, dropping her pole, grabbed up a knife out of a rusty pail. It was a long, narrow-bladed butcher knife. The blade flashed in the sun. So, too, did Hettie Kate's hair and her one good eye. Her hair, except for a faded streak or so, was a blazing red. Her eye was bright blue. The Negroes quit laughing. "I'll lay you wide open," she said. The Negroes bent over and began tinkering with their lines.

She stood there watching them for a minute, her breast heaving. "Big mouth bastards," she said. She dropped the knife into the pail and turned toward a man who was sitting on a dirt bench or shelf halfway up the bank and in the shade of a basswood tree. "Ain't nobody gonna give me the laugh," Hettie said.

The man didn't say anything, but shifted about a little on the bench. He was looking at his line, where, well out toward the middle of the creek, it slanted away from the end of a long bamboo pole. It was taut with the drag of the current. He was thin-nish and slumped-over, with a dead-yellow moustache that followed the forlorn droop of his mouth. A peaked, wide-brimmed straw hat, the sort farmers wear in the field, sat too high up on his head.

Hettie picked up her willow pole and brought the fish in. With her back to the Negroes, she held the line a couple of feet above the sinker and swung it against a stump, knocking the bullhead off the hook. She kicked at the fish with her bare foot, and moved on over into the shade of the basswood. Squatting down, she took the butcher knife and a chunk of liver out of the pail. "Big mouth devils!" she said. She hacked at the liver, picked up a little piece, and then, glancing up, almost caught the man looking at her. She baited her line.

The man uncrossed his legs. Then he crossed them again. Hettie stood up, facing the creek, but she turned suddenly and this time caught the man's eyes on her. "What you gawkin' at?" she said.

He uncrossed his legs. "I was gonna say nobody ain't ketchin' nothin' on liver."

Hettie picked up the pail. "Well, now that you done gone and said it, I ain't seen *you* ketchin' nothin'," she said. She went over, and up a little, to where the man was sitting. "But what you baitin' with?"

Across the creek the hunchback was coming down the bank to rejoin the other Negroes. The yellow Negro had knotted the corners of a red bandanna and put it on his head. The little black one had taken off his shoes and was picking up clods with his toes and then sticking his foot into the water, letting the clods melt away. "Keep that big foot outa that water, boy," the yellow Negro said. "Ain't no fish gonna come foolin' round where yoh foot is."

The man pushed a big tomato can along the bench toward Hettie Kate. She sat down, holding the willow pole upright between her knees, and looked into the can. Then she poked around in it with a twig. It was half full of earthworms and fresh, black dirt. There were a few grubs, too. The earthworms were big, the sort one finds almost anywhere in the Spring before the ground has dried out. "I ain't baitin' with no worms," Hettie said. She pushed the can back.

The man lifted his line out of the water until he could see the bait on the three hooks, and then dropped it back, fastening the pole, as before, in the bank, and resting it on a crotched stick to his right. Hettie Kate twisted about some more. "I ain't puttin' any worm on no hook," she said. She took the pole from between her knees. The man looked sidewise at her and then across the creek. "Don't mind them wall-eyed niggers," she said. She dangled her line in front of him. He drew the line over, took the liver off the hook, and started to bait it with a couple of worms.

"Hi, Dave," the hunchback called over, "I see you got comp'ny." Hettie Kate swung the pole around, jerking the line and hook through the man's hand. "Mind your own goddam business!" she said. The other Negroes said something to the hunchback and he went about looking at his throw lines.

## II

Hettie Kate turned back to the man. Blood was dripping off his left hand. "Good God A'mighty, honey, what've I done gone and did?" The man didn't say anything. The blood was coming from his wrist, in tiny jets. Hettie watched it for a second. "You better take and suck the poison out," she said. "That ain't no new hook."

The man put his mouth to his wrist. Then he took it away, spat out some blood, and leaned back against the bank, his face paling. Hettie bent over and tried to tear off a piece of her petticoat. But the hem was hard to get through. Taking the butcher knife, she started a tear, and ripped off a good-sized rag. She set the can to the left of her and slid over by the man. He was holding his hand on his lap, the blood reddening his overalls. She watched the blood jet a couple of times. Then she wound the rag around his wrist and tied the ends in a hard knot. She patted his hand. "It ain't hurtin' none, is it, honey?"

He sat forward, slumping over the way he was when she first saw him. "No," he said, "it ain't hurtin' none to speak of." The Negroes, their eyes big, were looking over. Hettie kept watching the man's wrist. "It ain't soakin' through much," she said.

He looked down at the bandage. A pinpoint of red was showing on it. "It ain't soakin' none to worry about," he said.

Hettie picked up the knife and dropped it back into the pail. "You ain't lookin' any too good," she said. She glanced up and down the creek, then reached into her bosom and brought out a small whiskey flask, about two-thirds full. She handed it over toward him. But he didn't offer to take it. "Go ahead, honey. There ain't nobody lookin'."

"Them niggers are lookin'," he said.

"They ain't nobody," she said.

"I ain't used to no drinkin'," he said.

"My God, honey, this ain't no liquor. It's medicine." She put the flask to her lips and took a long pull at it. "But here, I oughta be ashamed. I ain't the one what's ailin'." She slid over against him and held the flask to his mouth. He gulped a little of the liquor, then took hold of the flask and finished it off. He sat for a minute holding the flask on his knee. "I reckon I better be settin' out," he said. He stood part way up, but she pulled him back.

"You ain't settin' out nowhere, honey," she said. "You're lookin' plumb done up."

She crowded closer against him, and patted his wrist. The point of red had spread out until it was the size of a penny. The Negroes were humming an old bayou song, the hunchback striking in with words now and then. Hettie took the flask out of the man's hand and sent it flashing over toward them. It hit the water, floated for a second, and then sank. The Negroes ducked their heads, pretending to dodge. "I wish it'd busted one of their damn woolly heads," she said.

The liquor was brightening the man's eyes a little. He straightened up. "Where you from?" he said. "I ain't never saw you hereabouts." Hettie put a big worm on her hook, and after throwing the line back up the bank she whizzed it forward into the creek, the heavy sinker making a plunking sound. "You workin' around hereabouts?" he went on.

Hettie pushed her elbow against him. "I am and I ain't, honey," she said. "But you're gettin' mighty curious." She pressed harder against him. "Still, I ain't mindin', sweetheart."

"You mean you're aimin' to quit on somebody?" he said.

"I ain't workin', honey, where there's no other woman. Danks claimed there wasn't gonna be no other woman. Then last night

that loud-mouth old ma of his'n come bustin' in with all her traps."

The man's line ran out toward midstream. He pulled it in, but there was nothing on it. The bait was gone from two of the hooks. He brought the line back up to the bench, but Hettie caught it. She took three or four worms and slipped them on the hooks, the man watching her. She let go of the line and he swung it out into the stream.

Then he lifted it up and dropped it a little farther downstream. He glanced at Hettie Kate. "I ain't got no woman on my place," he said. "I ain't never had."

Hettie's line ran out toward the middle of the stream, then cut upstream and around toward the bank. She pulled in a big carp. It had swallowed the hook. She held it on the bench and ran her finger around in its mouth for a minute. Then she jerked the hook out and a piece of gill with it. "A damn sucker fish," she said, "fattened up like a hog. But they ain't fitten, honey, for white folks like us."

She stood up and threw it across the creek. It struck the bank up pretty high and came flopping down between the yellow Negro and the little black one. The little Negro grabbed it and pulled a gunny sack out of the water. He opened the sack and was putting the fish into it when the hunchback took it and threw it back across the creek. It thudded against the bank just below Hettie and the man. "Keep yoh ole fish, One-Eye," he said.

"You go to hell, you broken-back buzzard!" Hettie said.

The fish flopped on down the bank, into and out of a clump of young nettles, and then into the water. The yellow Negro and the little black one had a few words with the hunchback. Then they got to laughing and began humming another song, keeping time by slapping their hands on their legs.

Hettie Kate left her line lying out on the bank and sat down again. "Why ain't you got no woman?" she said.

"I just ain't," he said.

"'Just ain't' ain't no reason, sweetheart. Even them niggers have got women." She rubbed at her thigh, and her dress came up a little above her knee. The Negroes quit humming and began looking over.

The man looked straight ahead, his eyes beginning to dull. Hettie pushed her foot over against his. He glanced down, saw her leg, and reddened up. "It's gettin' about sundown," he said. He fixed his eye on his line again, and moved his foot away from the woman's. She put her hand on his. "You ain't lettin' no nigger stand out ahead of you are you, honey?"

The Negroes were passing a bottle back and forth and were talking and laughing more than ever. The man moved his hand away. "Hell, honey, I ain't no poison," Hettie said. "Where was you brought up that you ain't never had no woman?"

The man didn't say anything.

Hettie put her foot over against his again. "Where'bouts is your place?"

"Down the crick a ways," he said. He glanced sidewise at her, and then turned and looked down along the creek, where a cowpath followed the bank midway on its slope and disappeared in the willows. "I reckon it's past time I was settin' out," he said. He glanced down at her leg again and then across toward the Negroes. "I gotta be goin'."

The woman slid over against him and took his bandaged hand in hers. "You set still," she said. "Ain't I already said you ain't lookin' good? Or let's go on down the crick a piece." But the man didn't move. She eyed the blood on the bandage. "Even the lowest-down man on earth wouldn't get along without woman-help, honey." He crowded away from her a

little, against the end of the bench. "There ain't enough wrappin' on that there wrist," she said. She tore off another strip of petticoat.

"It ain't needin' no more wrappin'," he said. His line cut in toward the bank, bending the pole until it almost touched the water. He pulled it in. It was another carp. With the butcher knife Hettie cracked it heavily just behind the eyes. The fish gave a quiver or two and lay still, its eyes clouding, its big scales shining. Hettie stood up and threw it out toward the Negroes. It fell short and began floating down along the farther bank. The little Negro started to wade in after it, but the other two called him back.

Hettie sat down and picked up the strip of petticoat. The sun was getting low, its light striking high up on the opposite bank. From down along the creek came the sound of a cowbell. "Gimme your hand, honey, so I can wrap it."

"It don't need no wrappin'," he said. "I gotta go."

### III

She reached across his legs, got the pole, and threw his line in. "Fishin's just gettin' good, sweetheart. Next time we'll ketch white folks' fish." He propped the pole over the forked stick. She snuggled up against him, and he began to tremble a little. "What sorta place you got, honey?"

He closed his hands. "It ain't nothin' but a small place," he said. His teeth were chattering. Across the creek the hunchback was just finishing the bottle. He was standing up, a little wobbly, his big head rolling between his high shoulders, the other two Negroes watching him and grinning.

"I mean what you raisin' on your place, honey?" Hettie said. "Corn and oats and such truck?"

"Only just grain mostly," he said. "I ain't never fooled around with no stock." He tried to draw away from her.

"You mean you ain't raisin' no hogs or cattle, not even for your own meat or nothin'?"

"No," he said, "I ain't never messed with no home butcherin'. But I gotta be goin'."

She put her hand over his. "You oughta raise stock, sweetheart. And anybody'd have their own meat. There ain't nothin' to home butcherin' when you got somebody to help along with it."

"That ain't no woman's work," he said.

She squeezed his hand. "How you know it ain't no woman's work, honey? You only just said you ain't never had no woman. So what you know about any woman?"

The hunchback was waving the bottle. "Hi, Dave, your line's runnin' all up and down the crick every whicherway."

The man made a move to pull the line in, but Hettie held his hands. "Don't notice them damn niggers, honey." She held his hands, tightly, in both of hers. He sighed heavily. Then he tried to draw his hands away. The Negroes were nudging one another and showing their teeth in broad smiles. By now his line had run in close to the bank, and was still. He tried to say something, but only mumbled. Finally, he grew quiet.

Hettie let go of his hands and put her arm around him. "You ain't said, honey, why you ain't never had no woman. It ain't fitten for a nice man like you not never to have had no woman."

He began trembling again, violently. Hettie held him to her and then leaned around a little and kissed him full on the mouth. He sprang up and away from her. The Negroes set up a loud whooping and laughing, dancing up and down.

The man backed away, knocking his fish-pole down the bank. The line began cutting through the water again. Hettie Kate jumped up and caught the man by the hands and tried to pull him back to the bench, but he broke away and started running and stumbling along the bank toward the willows. "Hi, One-Eye," the hunchback yelled, "there done goes your onliest man."

"You black polecat!" Hettie screamed at him. "I'll cut your heart out!" She grabbed the knife and ran part way down to the creek. Then she turned and saw the man disappearing along the cowpath among the trees. She took out after him, the Negroes not laughing any more. The hunchback began running down along his side of the creek, close to the water. Hettie broke in through the willows, and half fell over a barbed-wire fence, ripping her dress.

But she was up again. The man was still running, now on, now off, the cowpath. "Wait!" she screamed after him. He looked back for an instant, his hat gone, his face white. He stumbled and fell, and Hettie gained on him a little. "Wait, you white bastard! There ain't no man gonna get me laughed at!" But he was back on his feet, and in a moment was out of sight. Across the creek the hunchback was yelling, "Hi, One-Eye! For God's sake, One-Eye!"

Hettie Kate stopped running. Then she started again, and again stopped, this time dead in her tracks, and stood looking ahead to where at a bend in the creek the man had disappeared. The hunchback was still yelling, "Hi, One-Eye! Come on back here, One-Eye!" She turned and threw the knife in the direction of his voice. Then she took a pin from her bosom, pinned together the rent in her dress, and started back toward the dam, sobbing heavily.

# THE PEDAGOGUES LEAP TO SAVE US

BY H. E. BUCHHOLZ

**A**way back in 1857 a group of representative American educators founded what they called the National Teachers Association. Subsequently known at various times as the National Education Association, and the National Education Association of the United States, and honored in 1906 with a congressional charter, the organization for more than half a century pursued a quiet and creditable course, adhering steadfastly to its first declared principle:

To elevate the character and advance the interests of the profession of teaching, and to promote the cause of popular education in the United States.

During those five or six decades it was composed of a substantial group of serious-minded and level-headed school people, and they met from time to time in dignified sessions for the purpose of discussing, intelligently and honestly, whatever educational problems happened to press for solution at the moment. When a new executive was to be chosen, the members turned to the foremost educators of the day, and among those called to the presidency were William T. Harris, J. Ormond Wilson, Thomas W. Bicknell, Nicholas Murray Butler, J. M. Greenwood, Charles W. Eliot, Oscar T. Corson, William H. Maxwell, David Starr Jordan, and Ella Flagg Young.

Under this leadership the Association made such notable progress that in 1914, when an annual convention was in session

in St. Paul, President Woodrow Wilson sent a message in which he said—truthfully:

Thoughtful people all over the country follow the deliberations of the National Education Association with genuine interest. . . . I think that no one long associated with the profession of teaching can have failed to catch the inspiration of it, or to see how great a power may be exercised through the classroom in directing the thinking and the ambition of the generation coming on, or can have failed to realize that nothing less than a comprehension of the national life is necessary to fit a teacher for the great task of preparation and adaptation to the future that education attempts.<sup>1</sup>

That was in 1914. Certainly Mr. Wilson, if he were living today, would not subscribe his name to a like endorsement of an organization that has since lost nearly all its old character, and is engaged in activities that can only amaze and depress its friends. The purpose of the present article is to survey the process by which it was stripped of the dignified habiliments of its heyday, and garbed in the sorry raiments it now sports—the pants of a clown, the blouse of a serf, and the crepe-wrapped plug hat of a camp-meeting revivalist.

Within a few years after Mr. Wilson penned his commendation, the United States got into the World War, and for a

<sup>1</sup> Journal of Proceedings and Addresses of the Fifty-second Annual Meeting, National Education Association of the United States, 1914, p. 23.