

Spring Pastoral

A story by JAMES COOK

THE SPRING SUN felt new and good and Farley wriggled his bare toes deep into the warm sand near the cabin door. He could hear Nona inside, sedge-brooming the floor in soft, regular swishes. A bluejay glided up into the chinaberry tree in the front yard and sat there ruffling its feathers and cocking its head from side to side. As much as he could see of Lakashoola county was green and fresh.

It was a fine spring day, but Farley felt sick inside.

For Boone Timmons was still down there, sitting on a stump at the edge of the swamp and peering up toward Farley's cabin. Ever since he had come up from the swamp woods two full days ago, he had done nothing but sit there and stare. In the

nights, he had crept back under the cover of swamp foliage, but in the light of day he always returned to the open. And each day he had found a sitting place closer and closer to Farley's cabin.

Farley's nearest neighbor was John Hargett, who lived three and a half miles away. And the nearest community was Calvintown, eighteen miles away. But although it had been a month since Farley had seen anyone other than his wife, he spoke no word to the man who had come up from the swamp. For he knew now what Boone Timmons was there for.

And Farley shivered with the thought that he had no weapon to prevent it from happening, and that the nearest help was

three and a half miles away.

When Farley first caught sight of Boone, the man had a croker sack with him, and Farley had tried not to feel especially uneasy about his stopping down there. He had hoped Boone was heading somewhere farther up the river and was just stopping by there to rest. But since then he had seen the man take food from the bag and eat it, had seen that he was prepared for a long wait. And there was no way Farley could keep from knowing what Boone Timmons was waiting for.

Farley packed his pipe, lit it, and leaned back against the rain-grayed door sill, but as he did these things he never took his eyes from the man who sat at the edge of the swamp woods. Boone was less than a hundred yards away, near enough for Farley to see the bright scar that ran down one side of his nose and through the beard stubble of one cheek, to see the stump of the left ear that had been lost two springs ago, and near enough to see the eyes. The eyes, Farley reckoned, were the things that always forced his gaze back to the man. They had the same fascination as the glinting eyes of a night animal.

Until four years ago, the year that Nona and Farley married and bought their piece of land

in Lakashoola county, the few scattered settlers on the lonely upriver land had heard of Boone Timmons, but they had never seen him. For he lived alone the year around somewhere down in the Chawnee-hatchee swamp-water country that spread out thirty or forty square miles below Farley's place. Living, as far as anyone knew, off fish and game and plants that grew wild in the swamp.

The first spring that Boone came up out of the swamp was four years ago. It was Len Smith's wife that time, she screaming and trying to get away and Boone taking it right out in Len's new-plowed cotton field. Len, a man small and frail like Farley, had run out to her and tried to beat him away. But when he did, Boone smashed Len's jaw with the heel of one of his powerful hands, smashed it so that Len had had to stay more than a week in the Calvin-town hospital.

The following day a posse of Farley's neighbors had gone into the swamps with bloodhounds. But in two days of searching through the Chawnee-hatchee's thirty-odd square miles of bogs and tangles and quicksands, they had found no trace of Boone Timmons.

That once seemed enough for Boone and he did not return

from the swamps for another year.

Then one night at plowing time of the next year, John Hargett came by Farley's cabin to borrow his shotgun. For Boone had come upriver again. And although John was as independent and word-bound as the rest of the upriver men of the county, Farley could piece together enough of what he did say to know that this time it had been John Hargett's wife, while John was in town with the wagon.

Three days later John returned tired and muddy to report that he had lost Farley's gun in a slough bog. But like many another man who had gone after Boone Timmons, John had not been able to find the trace of a trail through that dark backwater land.

And again after that one afternoon, Boone remained in

James Cook spent his boyhood in Alabama and the northwest section of Florida. He was in the Seabees when he was seventeen. He has tried his hand at such diverse jobs as steel mill worker, stevedore, pool parlor rack boy, lumber stacker, salesman, soda jerker, and newspaper editor, but has now settled down to reporting for the United Press in Miami. He started to write fiction while going to the University of Southern California, and this is his first published story.

the swamps throughout another year.

When Timmons made his trip upriver the next spring, he started after Ward Sizemore's wife, but Ward got to her in time and knocked off one of Boone's ears with a mattock.

It was two springs ago that Farley had heard of that. Boone hadn't come upriver the past spring, and Farley had for two years nursed the hope that Ward's mattock had scared him away for good.

FARLEY SPENT all afternoon sitting in his doorway, lighting his pipe from time to time and watching the still, waiting figure of Boone Timmons. The sun slowly moved down behind the river woods and finally night began creeping slowly up through the swamp thickets. A few crickets made their chittering noises and every now and then a bullfrog would grunt.

Nona had lit the lamp and had gone back into the kitchen to punch up the stove for supper. As the evening passed farther and farther towards night the lamp inside seemed to grow brighter and, sitting in the doorway, Farley's back felt heat from the kitchen stove. Inside there was light and warmth from the stove and the comfortable woman sounds that

Nona made fixing supper.

He heard Nona's light steps behind him and he turned and looked up at her. She was drying her hands on a gingham apron and he thought how pretty her hands were, not hard and wrinkled like most, but tender and soft like those of a town woman.

"Supper'll be ready pretty soon, Farley, soon as you're ready."

"I'll be right in," he answered. "Want to wash up first, and then I'll be right in."

"All right. It'll be waiting on you," she said, and then after she had walked back to the kitchen she called, "I made some peach fritters tonight like you like." And there was a good, soft something in her voice that for a moment made him want to run straight to the man at the swamp edge and smash with his fists at that ugly, watching face.

But the moment passed and once again the sickness of fear gripped him, and tiny points of sweat came from his chest at the thought of what would have happened if Nona had said anything. Or had even looked in the direction of the swamp woods. For once anything was said by her, once the existence of Boone Timmons was even openly recognized, Farley knew he would have to fight him

then, would have to go out there and either kill him or be killed.

Nona hadn't said anything since Boone had begun sitting down there. She had looked out at him that first day. And Farley had seen the terror in her eyes when she saw the hulking grotesque of a man sitting down there. After that first day Farley hadn't seen her even glance toward the swamp.

During the two days that Boone had been there, Farley had tried to think a way out of his fear. He had thought of trying to get Nona away from the cabin and across the fields and hills to neighbors. But he knew that as soon as they stirred from the cabin it would happen, and the one clear thought in Farley's mind was that he must not be there when it did.

It was almost black dark when Boone rose and stretched and moved back into the thick swamp growth. When he could no longer see him, Farley went inside and set the door bars in place. And he sighed, not of relief but more like the sigh of a man who is through with a day of hard, wearying work.

For he knew that Boone would still be there tomorrow, and that through the night he would be hiding down in the

dark swamp foliage, watching the cabin—waiting.

The waiting in the night was the most terrifying thing of all to Farley. The man might be anywhere out there in the darkness. For a long time now Farley had realized that Boone was enjoying the delay—that like a cat with a field mouse, he was taking pleasure in Farley's growing, weakening fear. And he knew that when the man had taken all the pleasure he wanted from that fear, he would then pounce.

After supper that night he sat in the kitchen by the stove, for it was not cold enough to build a fire in the front room hearth. Nona sat at the table, cutting out a dress from material she had bought in Calvintown, and Farley opened the Bible to Matthew and began reading. But it was hard to keep his mind on it, and he had to read some of the familiar verses over again to get any sense from them.

"It's warmer tonight," Nona said. "I reckon you'll want to get plowing done pretty soon."

"That's so."

Farley answered as if it weren't important. But he thought of how much he had ached all winter for the warm spring days of plowing, days when a man could again stir up

a good sweat and really have a need for a tub-washing in the late afternoon; days when the earth behind the plowshare would feel cool and fresh and alive to a man's feet; when he might sit on the root of a shade tree every now and then to cool off. And the earth, he knew, was just yearning to be plowed, needed to be plowed while it was still moist from winter frosts.

"You might ought to get up to the ridge strip and plow some before rain sets in, Farley."

The ridge strip was three-quarters of a mile from their cabin and Farley knew why she had mentioned it. If he were up there he wouldn't have to be anywhere nearby when it happened. He started to tell her that he knew why she had said it.

But he didn't and just said "Maybe."

"That ridge strip'll be mighty hard to work when it gets all muddy and messy up there," Nona continued, with each word making it easier and easier for Farley to be away when it happened. "Last year our best cotton came off that ridge, and I just bet you we can have a even better crop off it this year. Yes, sir, I think it'd be a lot better doing it tomorrow and the next few days, Farley."

And again he could find

strength to answer with nothing more than "Maybe."

Farley knew he wouldn't go out to the ridge strip the next day, that he couldn't go that soon. He told himself that he wouldn't go plowing at all until he had done his man-duty of clearing Boone Timmons off the place; but even while he was forming those words in his mind he had the weakening feeling that he would probably go up there the day after tomorrow. And he hated the feeling and tried to get rid of it by taking a firmer grip on the Bible and silently forming each word with his lips. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

HE DIDN'T go plowing the next day but took his same seat in the doorway, in the same place where he had sat for the past two days.

It was almost noon when he caught sight of Boone Timmons' short, overmuscled figure lumbering slowly up from the swamp thicket.

When he reached the cleared land, he paused for a moment, then started across the cotton field toward Farley, taking in

the winter-roughened cotton rows one at a stride. Farley flinched with the thought that the man was going to walk right up to the cabin, but when he reached the little shade oak forty or fifty yards out in the field from Farley's front door, he sat down and propped himself against its trunk. Then Boone resumed his peering. He looked past Farley and into the house most of the time, but occasionally he looked straight at Farley, and when he did, Farley couldn't help dropping his gaze.

Nona was back in the kitchen but he heard no sounds from her. There were no clouds in the sky and the sun was the hottest it had been so far that year.

It wasn't until three o'clock that Farley finally said something. All that time he had been thinking about the lie that he was going to tell the man.

"T-Timmons," he said, not very loud, "they's a shotgun just inside this house."

The man cupped his hand behind his good ear and leaned toward Farley.

"What'd you say?"

Farley had forgotten the slashed ear, and it panicked him to think that he must now repeat the lie which he had needed more than three hours to voice.

"I say — I got a shotgun just

inside this house." He said it slowly so that he wouldn't stutter again.

The man stared at Farley with stone blue eyes. Through the tense minutes, Farley waited for Boone to answer, but the man said nothing. There was only the stone blue gaze and the steamy silence of the swamp-land beyond it.

And Farley did not say anything more. As the silent minutes passed, he knew more and more surely that even if it was true that a gun was inside his cabin — even if he had one loaded and in his hands — he would not have the courage to use it. So he did not speak again.

There was no conversation between Farley and Nona that night, for it had again been almost full night before Boone Timmons had crept back into the swamp wood. But Farley was aware of a silent agreement between them that he would plow the ridge strip the next day, and he was too exhausted to pretend even to himself that he might not go.

After he had checked to see that the door bars were firmly settled and had blown out the lamp, he slipped out of his overalls and got into the bed with Nona. The bed was made of striped ticking cloth and good cotton batting, unlike the shuck

and straw mattresses that most of the riverland farmers slept on. It was a comfortable place to sleep, but Farley lay awake on it for a long time. Nona lay on her side and breathed long, even breaths as if she were asleep, but Farley knew that she, too, was awake.

Once in the night Farley awoke trembling against Nona's soft little breasts, for he had dreamed a terrible thing. He had seen the man get up from under the shade scrub and start toward the cabin. Farley got inside and after a lot of trouble finally settled the front door bar into its groove. But when he couldn't find his shotgun, he went back to the kitchen to ask Nona about it. But Nona wasn't there. Only Boone Timmons was standing there with his bear arms hanging loose beside him and his eyes blaring crazily at Farley. After a moment Farley saw that there was some blood oozing from the man's mouth. At first Farley couldn't tell what the man was chewing, but then he looked more closely and he saw that it was one of Nona's hands. And that was when he awoke and trembled against Nona's soft little breasts.

FARLEY harnessed the mule soon after dawn the next morning and set out for the

ridge strip three-quarters of a mile away. When he reached the first rise two hundred yards or so from the cabin, he stopped and looked back.

Boone Timmons was still hidden from sight, but Nona was standing in the sandy front yard near the chinaberry tree. Standing very still as she always did when she was listening. From that distance, Nona looked like the little girl she had been when Farley first met her many years ago. Even that far away, he could see the early breeze moving the skirt about her slim legs, could see it gently touching her hair.

And the sight made him want to call to her, to have her come with him to the ridge strip. But Farley knew that the moment he made any move to get Nona away from the cabin, Boone would pounce.

"Get up, there!" he called to the mule Lucius louder and harsher than necessary, and he tracked on over the hill, out of sight of the cabin.

He couldn't remember a time in all of his twenty-eight years when he had ever plowed as much as he did that day. The mule Lucius was fresh for work after a winter of idleness and Farley kept him going until his rump was shiny with sweat. Farley didn't stop once that

day except to rest Lucius. He didn't even stop to eat the dinner that Nona had carefully packed in the molasses pail. Toward sunset his knees grew limber and it seemed to him as if all the sweat was gone from his body, but he kept on plowing the ridge strip. For the more tired he became the less he had to think. Even after sundown he kept Lucius going, until it finally became so dusky that he couldn't see to make his furrows true. And he knew there was no use staying up there any longer.

After Lucius was in his shed and Farley had washed up, he came into the kitchen and sat by the stove while Nona finished fixing supper. Nona talked cheerily about little things while she moved about the room, laying out the meal.

"Whyn't you turn my garden ground after you're through with the ridge strip, Farley? I'm gonna have to get some seed planted if we're to have fresh vegetables this summer."

"I'll get to it right away, Nona."

Nona was wearing a neat little cotton blouse and the bright, flower-printed skirt that Farley had always liked so much. She had on neatly folded cotton socks and saddle oxfords. Nona had always worn shoes, even around the house, and

Farley liked that.

"Yes, sirree, it's sure gonna be nice to have some rosnyears again, and some nice little green onions like you like."

And Nona talked about the way she planned to lay out their garden as soon as Farley got it plowed, about how Farley must get some mustard seed the next Saturday he went to town, and about the canning she wanted to get done that summer. She spoke of the many little plans that she had for that year and for all their years together that would follow.

Except for the dark, ugly bruise on her throat about the size of a halfdollar or a big man's thumb, Nona seemed the same as before.

Despite his hard day's work and the fact that he had had no dinner in the field, Farley ate only small helpings from the dishes on the table. As soon as Nona was also through eating, he stood up.

"Think I'll go out for a little walk," he said.

"They's some pie. Won't you eat a little dish of it?"

"No. Thankye."

"They's still two or three of the fritters left. Wouldn't take no more than a second to heat 'em up."

"No. No, thankye. I think I'll just go out and smoke my pipe."

Outside Farley lit his pipe and strolled off down the river trail. He walked for a long time, past many miles of pine woods and swamp thickets, past moon-soaked farm fields, and along the slow, silent river. His pipe had gone out long ago when he finally stopped to tap out its ashes on a stump beside the river trail.

While standing there, refilling it, Farley heard a fluttering noise under a tree just a few feet away. He walked over to it, and in the clear moonlight he saw that it was a wood thrush caught in some farmer's wooden trap.

He reached into it and carefully took the bird in his hand. He held it for several moments, then opened his fingers. The bird sprang away from his palm and he watched it wing away into the night.

And Farley said aloud: "Nona is soft and warm like a wood thrush."

And having said that to himself while standing there in the night by the river trail somehow seemed awfully funny to Farley, and he began laughing, hysterically.

God Bless You!

or, Kleenex Rides the Snuff

By BESS GORDON

THE SNEEZE MAY fill the air with germs, transmitting them from man to man, or woman to woman, or man to woman for that matter; it may also help spread epidemics, create sudden intimacies or lasting rifts, and generally spray the void with a quality that was lacking from it a moment before. Most people are disinclined to take the sneeze seriously or honestly. They are shy or furtive about it, hiding their faces in a blanket or a handkerchief, stifling it with the well known gesture of the hand, or simply *holding back* the full, invigorating force of the explosion in a manner known scientifically as *niesen interruptus*. The latter is by far the most frustrating, and considered from any psychological point of view, has, in the long run, inflicted more harm than good on suffering mankind.

The comfort and release derived from the *wholehearted*, in-

voluntary spasm of the sneeze, most scientists agree, is rarely equalled by any other form of experience. You will forget all about your vitamins and gymnasiums, throw away your diets, anti-histamins and precious dopes, once you've mastered the secret of this involuntary reaction. Yes, one simple, everyday sneeze to which the entire being responds, vibrating like a taut bow from head to toe, — or tip to top if you prefer — is worth the collected works of Dr. Froude and half the papyrus lost in the sacking of Aristotle's library in Alexandria!

Of course there are sneezes and sneezes. Just as there is snuff, hay fever, the "running nose," the queer and complicated ritual of "blowing," the endless scale of inflection ranging from soprano to *basso falsetto* as varied in nuance and significance as the tonal distinctions which separate the hundreds of