

HONEYMOONING IN A QUAINI MISSISSIPPI TOWN
By Mark Lowry

THE HONEYMOON

I belong to my lover,

And his longing is for me!

Come on, my dear--

Let us go out to the field

And spend the night in the cefarim.¹

Let's hie us early to the vineyards

And see if the vine has bloomed,

If the blossoms are open--

And the pomgranates are in flower;

There I will ^{yield} to you my love!

(The mandrakes exude their scented drops!)

Above our doors are all kinds of fine fruit,

Both dried and preserved,

Which I have stored up, my love, for you!²

1. Cefarim: An area outside the city for barns and storehouses.

2. From "The Song of Songs"--Chapter 7, verses 10--13.

Translated from the Hebrew by Mark Lowry.

The Town

En route to New Orleans, Arthur and Jane Brown, teachers from Chicago, on honeymoon, arrived at noon in the little town of Wesson, Mississippi. As Highway 51 passed through the middle of the town, they parked their V-8 Ford coupe before a cafe advertised as the "Blue Moon," slowly descended from the car and entered the small eating establishment. Once inside, looking about the interior of the restaurant and viewing its customers, they realized that they were in a world strange to them.

The sallow-complexioned headwaiter and owner appeared promptly and politely to take the order.

"May we have oyster soup and crackers with coffee, please?" announced Arthur after a small conference with Jane.

"Certainly," replied the headwaiter as he disappeared into the rear of the building.

"Fire!" yelled someone out in the street.

Several customers leaped to their feet and rushed outside. Arthur said to Jane, "I think I'll just take a look while the soup is being prepared."

"And I'll wait," asserted the young woman.

Some ran to the fire; others lingered to talk.

Someone declared, "That's Old Man Harvey's house. Been trying to sell it for months. Guess he decided to sell it to the insurance company."

"They burn every now and then," commented another.

Now, for the first time, as he gazed in the direction of the burning house, Arthur noticed a towering brick chimney standing alone and rising like the Tower of Babel into the sky. Wondering what might be its meaning,

he returned to his seat beside Jane in the cafe.

As he sat down, the Model-T Ford fire truck passed ringing its bell and blowing its horn.

"Certainly takes the fire department a long time to get started," he commented.

"That's quicker than it sometimes is. At times the motor won't start," remarked a customer, rising from his table.

By now the waiter was bringing the soup and crackers with coffee. The room was a bit less crowded as some of the persons had remained outside and others coming remained on the sidewalk to talk.

"Will there be anything else?" asked the polite owner.

"Nothing else, thank you," replied Arthur and Jane together.

"Now that the excitement is over, let's eat," admonished Jane.

"Do you know, this place fascinates me. There is something strange about it. It has a history, no doubt," stated Arthur.

"Well, we could ask some questions if you like. That would not take long," consented Jane.

"That tall chimney--I have seldom seen anything like it. It must be all that remains of some large factory or industrial plant."

"You're right. That's all that remains above the ground of the Mississippi Mills." The speaker was an ancient man, wrinkled and gray, but with the appearance of one desiring to talk. He was standing and staring at the strangers.

"Will you sit with us?" invited Arthur.

"Believe I will," replied the ancient man, sitting next to Arthur.

"Will you have something?" questioned Arthur.

"I'll take coffee with you, if you don't mind."

"Tell us about the mill," insisted Jane.

"It's a long story. The ghosts of what used to be walks about the place

at night. They even dance about the chimney on some nights. On stormy nights they sho^oe cut up. Them old vacant houses north of town is infested with 'em.

"Now this here town in the late eighties and nineties was two miles long and a mile wide with houses as thick as could be and the mill right in the middle."

The ancient man's story ran on for an hour as two astounded listeners lent him their ears. Since they were on honeymoon vacation with no commitments, they were in no hurry. As both were history majors, they were all the more fascinated.

The man was Seth Mullins Jones, born out in the country from Wesson, had come to town to work in the mill when it was at its peak production back in 1890. When the mill closed, he had remained, but his children were all gone away, and his wife had passed on to glory. Now the few people working were cutting timber or working at the creameries, of which there were three in the town.

Taking his listeners back to the days right after the Civil War, he told his story of Wesson and the mill. It was the strangest story they had ever heard. Six years after the bloody war, Colonel J.M. Wesson, who had owned the land, together with Colonel Hamilton and Major Hallam, all ex-Confederate Army officers, established a cotton mill on the site of the present town of Wesson.

In 1871, the group of New Orleans business men, who had bought the property, sent Captain William Oliver to take charge of the mill. Colonel Richardson, the cotton king of the South, also became a controlling force in the mill. Both these men, having been Confederate Army officers, were able to command the respect and confidence of the people of the entire area. Their workers, consequently, were almost all natives of the locality. At first there had been no railroad, but soon a line was constructed to Lake Bonchartrain. After this, passengers and freight were ferried across the lake to another

The tale would have continued longer, but Arthur and Jane, very much in love, remembered that they were on honeymoon. They thanked Seth Mullins Jones, left the safe and returned to their car out on the street.

"Let's drive around and look at the place," urged Jane.

"Very well," agreed Arthur.

They drove west through an area where houses once were everywhere. Now they saw a house here and there. But everywhere were growing unattended gay flowers of rare and valuable species. There were brilliant daffodils and snowflakes, clumps of crepe myrtle and cedar. There was a tea rose with its delightful fragrance.

Arthur mused, "Victor Hugo once said that the spirit of a business was the spirit of the man who made it: That when the man died, the business died. That may be true, but as the bricks of the mill were taken to many places to be used in the construction of new buildings, so the people who left this place have gone to help build society and economy in their new homes."

Jane added, "That is the way of the world. The people, with their spirit and their skills, make the society of which they become a part."

"Let's find a room and stay a day or two."

"Agreed," consented Arthur.

Upon inquiry, they found that a certain Mrs. Longmire, living just out of town, was accustomed to furnish travelers room and board. At her home they found a comfortable room, a peaceful place--and a congenial landlady. There was, of course, no running water. In fact, such was practically unknown in the area.

"I could stay here a long time," mused Jane.

"So could I," echoed the other.

There was a soft knock at the door. Mrs. Longmire announced, "We shall have supper at six. It is now only three. You have time for a rest, a drive or a stroll."

railroad, where there were trains to New Orleans.

After twenty years of operation, at the time of Captain Oliver's death, the town was the largest in the area. The mill had become four mills, employing twelve to fifteen hundred people, operating twenty-five thousand spindles and eight hundred looms. Six thousand bales of cotton and two million pounds of wool went into the operation annually. The company owed no debt, and its stock brought four to one on the open market.

The citizens of the town and surrounding country had been happy, hard at work and contented. The mill workers had their gardens, their chickens and cows. For water they depended on deep wells and cisterns. The water supply for the mill came from Ford's Creek. All work, mill and farm, was proceeding at a maximum. There were good schools, and for recreation there ^{were} ball games.

At the death of Captain Oliver gloom set in. No one, it seemed, could take his place. One supervisor after another failed to make a go of things. Then came the panic of 1893. The storage rooms were all filled with cotton and woolen cloth, but there was no market for the goods. Production stopped. Workers were laid off. A desperate back-to-the-farm movement began. Unemployed men roamed the land in search of work. Many stayed on in Wesson, hoping for better days. Widows and disabled people were everywhere. The majority of the people had owned their homes, but some sold out. Others just left. One last abortive attempt to operate the mill left the town in total gloom.

For about twenty years after the collapse of the milling company, the town continued to die a slow death until dairying became established in the area, and three creameries were operating. Now a town that once boasted over five thousand people had fewer than eight hundred. Until the depression of the early thirties, people had become fairly well occupied and contented. But the depression had grown worse and worse. Work was scarce, and money was hard to come by. Wesson, the town with electric lights before New York, had become a has-been town.

"We do not need a drive. I need to relax and think. Let's take a stroll down through the flowers and trees." Jane's suggestion evoked a responsive note.

"Let's do," said Arthur enthusiastically.

Slowly down the path they walked, hand in hand. A gentle breeze swayed the June flowers and rustled the leaves on the oaks and gums. The pines sighed like the lovers, who almost swooned with happiness. Just to be alone together among the sighing trees was bliss. Arthur slipped his arm about Jane, who reciprocated his gesture of affection.

"Jane, we shall have been married a week tomorrow. Last Sunday Brother Spiers pronounced us man and wife in our little Chicago Baptist Church. These have been six days of heaven on earth. God has given me the jewel of life in you."

"God has given me the noblest man alive. I am happy beyond description. We are not kids. You are twenty-five and I, twenty-three. But I feel like a little child in a new world. Arthur, it will always be heaven when I am with you. It would be stark tragedy for something to separate us. May such never be!"

"I hope not," murmured Arthur.

"I could stay out here among these trees and flowers with you forever. Arthur, wherever you go, I want to be with you. That will be home."

"I hope and pray that we may always be together."

They wandered among the trees and vines until almost sunset. Jane, looking at her watch, gasped, "Arthur, it is almost six."

"We had better go back," admitted Arthur.

The garden vegetables and summer fruits on Mrs. Longmire's table were tempting, but two honeymooners, very much in love, are never very hungry. The hostess seemed to understand perfectly. She suggested that after supper

it would be pleasant to sit on the front porch and listen to the crickets, whip-poor-wills and other night birds. ^{songster}

The two assented cheerfully. "That will be a new experience for me," commented Jane. "I have spent all my life in the city of Chicago."

"It will be a treat for me, too," agreed Arthur.

Conversing with Mrs. Longmire on the screened front porch, the couple learned much more about the history and traditions of the town. The charter of incorporation forbade the the sale of intoxicants within the town's limits. However, there were beer taverns, ^{nearby} where often rough people assembled and ca- roused.

At length she observed, "Tomorrow will be Sunday. Would you like to attend church?"

"We always attend church. We met in Training Union and married at church. Our pastor married us last Sunday," replied Jane.

"Then you are really on honeymoon. I thought so."

Arthur admitted, "You might say so. We are here because we are fascinated with your town. On our way to New Orleans, we stopped at noon today in Wesson, and here we are. We may stay a few days."

"That will be fine," their hostess replied.

Arthur inquired, "What time are the services tomorrow?"

"Sunday School at ten and preaching at eleven. Would you let me go with you? I attend the Baptist Church, too."

"Certainly, we shall be happy to have you go with us," Jane assured her.

"Well, I suppose you would like to retire. We have breakfast at seven."

"Thank you, and good night," both replied.

"Good night," and Mrs. Longmire left them.

"Will you read the Scripture tonight?" ask ^d Arthur.

"Yes, if you will pray for us."

"'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for

his friends. You are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you.'"

"What an appropriate Scripture!" commented Arthur. "We belong to Jesus. We must live for Him every day."

"I think so," Jane agreed.

Arthur began to pray, "Lord, I thank Thee for Jane. She is my life. She is my joy and my inspiration. What a blessing that Thou hast given her to me!" He prayed about their lives and work, for Mrs. Longmire and the church. At length he concluded, "Lord, keep us this night in Thine everlasting arms."

When they arose from prayer with a thankful "amen!" he took her in his arms, folding her to himself. He lifted her and laid her gently on the bed. He lay beside her. They held each other in the arms of true love. Her tingling, vibrant form yielded completely to his strong, glowing body. He held her close, and she clung to him. Each whispered to the other, "This is heaven."

Awaking first in the morning as the sun rose in his June splendor, Jane gazed at Arthur, rousing himself from peaceful slumber. They clutched one another as they murmured, "Good morning."

"I could have a dozen children for you, Arthur, you big Saxon giant. Just to think of your children calling me 'mother'!"

"Well, I will caution you, little brunette angel, that will take time."

Both laughed.

"Better get dressed; Mrs. Longmire will be calling breakfast," warned Jane.

HOME

His quest beguiles the man
To dream of mystic calm
And toilsome labors plan
To gain Lethean balm.

He longs for phantom port,
A land of fairy towers,
Where spicy zephyrs sport
About the magic bowers.

He finds the far unknown,
Explores the ocean's realm;
But life at length has flown,
And storms his soul o'erwhelm!

Now seek the fireside's glow,
Where happy voices blend;
Forget the outside snow--
Life's maze of troubles end!

Affection's native haunt
May well your needs supply;
Can sate the human want
And worldly chill defy.

Mark Twain