

The Ceremony

by Gurney Norman

I'm in a mine, he thinks, huddled at the face with no light. I can breathe all right but the air is sulphuric, stale. I have to adjust, grow a kind of gills in my neck, become a fish in order to live this deep underground. It's so dark I believe that I don't have eyes until a prick of light comes toward me through the pitch black dark of the mine. It's like foxfire. It's like a spark from two thoughts striking one another. It's like the first star that ever was. Slowly it floats toward me, bearing a promise to bore my forehead like a breast-auger, like a mine drill. Shavings coil out like old memories, form shapes around the light. They form my father with a carbide lamp on his head. They form my mother wearing a shiny brooch at her throat and then they become Jesus carrying a candle that becomes a minnow and swims away through the mine's dark river. I can't see it but I hear the river gurgling and I panic trying to decide whether to follow or stay where I am.

Follow, says a voice within the water. Come with me.

I huddle against the face of the coal, wondering if my eyes are open or closed.

They're open, says the voice within the water. Come with me.

Face down in dark water, I see ancient ferns, tall as tipples a million years ago beneath the sea. As the water lightens I see a firmament arise, a lovely wilderness of plains and valleys and mountains, with creeks flowing in the valleys past wood and meadows, past bottom land where willows grow, and sycamores, and muskrats in their holes and turtles in the mud and kingfishers swooping low across the water as the sun goes down, filling the sky with orange and purple light.

The water is amber-colored now. I see minnows in it. I see a perch swim by. I see brilliant pebbles on the bottom, and green waving grass beneath the water. I see a sand-bar reaching out from shore. My feet sink into it.

Planted there, I rise up like a tree out of the water, a flowering shrub with gnarled branches, thick with leaves, adorned by blossoms white as clouds, moist with the dew of a brand new April evening.

Before me is a clearing, surrounded by trees, a green meadow marked in the center by an ancient stone, gray and weathered, writing on it obscure as hieroglyphics.

See the stone, says the voice within the water.

And beyond the stone: see the old woman emerging from the trees; see the wounded people limping after.

See Stella.

See Sherman Wagner.

See Will and Tom, carrying their brother Jack.

And see yourself among them, Wilgus, among the wounded, following old Aunt Haze as she walks across the meadow, past the stone, walks on toward the dogwood tree, which stands by the waters of Ancient Creek.

And hear old Haze as she leads the people to the tree. Gather now, she says. Gather 'neath the dogwood. Sit in a circle and rest yourselves. I'll go to the woods and get some herbs, and when I get back we'll get on with the healing.

"That's wonderful," said Aunt Haze. "Now, if we just had something to cut that root with."

"Let me bite it for you," said a beaver who had strolled in from the creek to see what was going on. "I can bite a lynroot in a jiffy." With a few quick bites of his large buck teeth the beaver cut the root and handed a length of it up to Aunt Haze.

"How come you want this lynroot, Aunt Haze?" the beaver asked. "I'm going to make a salve and heal some wounded people," Haze replied.

"Who are the people?" asked an owl perched in the top of the lyntree, listening to all that was said.

"They're friends from over in the settlements," said Aunt Haze. "There's been trouble over there. I'm trying to help 'em out. In fact, I wonder owl, if you'd do something for me?"

"What do you want me to do Aunt Haze?"

"I need you to fly across the mountains to the settlements, and spy out what's going on over there. These wounded people's in need of news. Could you go over and see what you can find out for us?"

"I'll be glad to," said the owl. And with a flap of his wings he flew away to begin his errands.

Aunt Haze thanked the lyntree for the gift of the root. She thanked the mole and beaver for their help. Then she set out through the woods toward the meadow again, where the wounded people were waiting under the dogwood tree.

Wilgus watched Aunt Haze prepare the healing salve. He watched her scrape the skin and bark from the lynroot into a bowl, then chop it up fine with her knife. Aunt Haze added some comfrey leaves and sassafras bark she carried in her pouch.

"What we need now is some water from Ancient Creek," Aunt Haze said. She handed Wilgus a cup and told him to go to the creek and fill it. When Wilgus came back with the water the old woman poured a few drops into the bowl, then set the cup aside. As she stirred the potion she chanted: *sha lahn thi, sha lahn thi, roon lah loon.*

After a while Aunt Haze said, "Okay, everybody scoot in close now, and I'll doctor your all's wounds."

With her fingers Aunt Haze smeared the healing salve on Wilgus's forehead. She put salve on the bullet wounds in Stella's neck. She treated Sherman Wagner's wounded leg, and several bruises Will and Tom hand on their bodies.

Aunt Haze set the bowl aside then and picked up the cup of water. She handed the cup to Wilgus and told him to take a drink, and pass it around for the others to drink from too. When the cup returned to Aunt Haze she sipped from it. Then she said, "Now let's help old Jack to get him a drink. Lift his head up, Wilgus. Rest his head on your knee, and I'll hold the cup to his mouth."

Wilgus moved into the center of the circle and gently raised Jack's head and slid his leg under it. Jack's eyes were closed and his lips were pale, and his breathing was so shallow his chest hardly moved. But Jack's flesh was warm. There was life yet in

him. When Jack had sipped the water, his eyelids fluttered open briefly, and he and Wilgus looked into each other's eyes. Jack tried to sit up then but Aunt Haze said, "You lay still a while, Jack. We ain't finished yet."

Gently Aunt Haze applied the healing salve to the terrible wound in Jack's side, and to the raw gash in his arm. Then she directed Wilgus to lay him on the ground again, and move back to his place in the circle. Wilgus watched Aunt Haze stretch out her arms and hold her hands over Jack. Three times she circled her hands above his head, chanting as she did so: *sha lahn tah, sha lahn tah, roon lah loon*. Aunt Haze sat with her eyes closed. Then she motioned for the people in the circle to scoot in tight around Jack, and place their hands upon him. Wilgus moved in close and rested his hand on Jack's chest. Aunt Haze held Jack's face in both her hands. When everybody was in place, close to Jack, Aunt Haze said, "Shhhhh, now you all listen."

The rushing sound of Ancient Creek nearby grew louder in the night as Wilgus listened. The water made a music in his ears; there were voices in it. There was moonlight on the water, breaking on the rushing waves and tiny sprays that flashed around the rocks and caught the rays of the full moon in the sky. From somewhere the sound of the owl and the rushing sound of the water rose and fell against each other for a long time. Then they both faded out as Aunt Haze spoke again.

"This meadow here by Ancient Creek is my family's old burying place," Aunt Haze said. Her voice was low and strong as a storyteller's now, warming to the tale. "It's a wonder-working power-place on the ground that people have been coming to for healing for more generations than I know about. There's just the one grave stone out yonder in the meadow to mark it, but all my people are buried here. My ancestors from generations way back in the ages are all laid here. And I'll be buried here myself one day. It's a powerful place. Power flows right out of the ground on Ancient Creek. It flows from the water-sound, and the air around. It flows down on us from the dogwood tree above. It passes through our bodies as we sit here, through our hands, out into Jack. It's helping to heal poor Jack. Time the sun comes up tomorrow, Jack's going to be good as new. All of us are. For as we let the power flow through us to him, it runs around our circle and hooks us up together and helps heal our wounds and give us new life too.

"We all need new life, and strength, for there's a sight of work to do. You all heard the owl hoot awhile ago. That was my friend the owl telling what he found out over in the settlements today. He says Landon Frazier has taken his old farm back, and that he means to keep it this time. Says old Landon's already started planting nut trees on the ski slope, and he plans to get a crop of sorghum in his bottom land. The King's Men are ganging up to stop Landon from doing that and so the word's gone out all over the hills for the people to come and help Landon reclaim his farm. So we'll all be getting up early tomorrow morning to go over and help Landon. Tonight we'll rest and heal. You need your rest in order for the power to work and heal your wounds. But by sunrise you'll all feel the power to work and heal your wounds. But by sunrise you'll all feel good again, ready to hike the hills and go to the settlements to stand beside of Landon when the battle comes. The thing for us to do right now is all lay down close to Jack, cuddle in close around him, and keep him warm. Tomorrow morning early, we'll all set out together across the hills."

Wilgus and Stella and Sherman and Will and Tom all lay down and snuggled in close to each other on the ground. When they were settled, Aunt Haze took off her shawl and spread it over the people. Then she went around the circle, tucking it in.

Most of the people went to sleep as soon as they lay down, but Wilgus lay awake

awhile. Snug among his fellows, he lay beneath the mantle looking up at the moist moonlight on the blossoms of the dogwood tree.

The white tree-flowers were what he saw.

What he heard was water rushing by.

He heard voices in it.

I love to tell the story, sang the water.

Of unseen things above.

Go to sleep now, said the water.

Go to sleep and dream lah lune.

Dream sha lan tah.

Dream la lune.

[This story first appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Kentucky Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1, July, 1984. It is reprinted with the author's permission. ED.]