

# Catawba

by Prudence Todd Moffett

*The author must firmly assure the reader that between Fairmont and Morgantown, West Virginia, the Monongahela River does have a wide bend, along which lay a settlement. In the 1950s an unexplored mound stood behind one of the houses. The remainder of the story is completely fictional as to the events and the people involved.*

Clive's foot slipped and he pitched forward onto both knees. Goddam Indians, why'd they make its sides so steep? His granddad swore an old mine must be hid somewhere up the mountain, some settler moved on, left a bunch of tailings here. *Time* covered red dog with this rich soil? *Time* smoothed it to this perfect shape? When it was plain if they had *time* to go up another fifty foot and finish it, the damn Indians would have ended up building a perfect cone? He grabbed the red stalk of a chokeberry bush and pulled himself erect.

When he got seated tailor-style on the top, he'd be able to survey his kingdom. Before him, Catawba's houses would scatter along the road where it hugged the river bank. This late the sun would be just right to catch the swirls the current left at the river's bend. Three miles down to his right sat the town of Jericho and Number 93, the mine he'd worked at all his life. Goddam close to forever, it felt like.

Now that he owned one, he parked his truck behind the house. No sense setting it out for some robber. He rode shank's mare back and forth to work till the war, when working all those shifts made an old flivver just about a necessity. Not that he shared it around, wasting gas to stop and pick up somebody on the way. Weather be damned, if they'd given two shakes they'd have bought their own flivver and stayed out of the rain, too. A once-a-month ride for Mary and the kids to Fairmont was often enough. She needed to get there another time, it was up to her.

Though the soil still held spring damp, some of the weeds and small bushes were set enough to hold his weight. Struggling to breathe, he continued his scramble up the slope. His pappy had kept it mowed; when he was a kid he could remember sliding down it in the snow. And he had handed over some good hard work to his boys, coming up. They finally quit on him, and well, really since the war ended, by the time he mowed the grass around the house, he found he wasn't up to handling the scythe himself any more.

Of course, they lost Clive Junior back before the war. Rotten luck his oldest son just happened to be alone at the still when the Feds moved in. Not much market for the rotgut they made, with Prohibition gone, but with the mine shifts so skimpy and himself the only one working, he'd had to do something to keep Mary, Sally, and

three boys fed. Even eating the wild sallet Mary gathered by the road, blackberries and the like she picked in season, burning the coal she gathered from alongside the tracks, she didn't make much difference. It took a man.

They'd been real careful getting to the still. It took tending, and they snuck up a different way every time, leaving no path to call notice to it. He set it under an overhang that caught the smoke. He never did figure out what put them onto it. Or have the least notion that when they closed in Clive Junior would fire away with that shotgun he stowed up there. They got his pappy's name out of him, damn them, and next thing he knew they were all in trouble. He swore Clive Junior was working for some other guys, and the littler boys got off. But when that Fed died, they tried his kid like an adult, and shipped him off to Moundville in a shot. Getting up there to visit him was next to impossible, so Mary set about keeping in touch with letters.

"Sorry now you never let him go to school, I bet," Mary said, when she asked him to drop her letter off at the company store in Jericho. "We'll never know how he is." The woman positively hankered for a black eye.

Clive Junior found somebody to answer for him, though, once or twice, let them know he was working in the coal mine they ran right inside the prison. Gave the men something to do, the warden bragged. Never heard of a loader or conveyor belt, just had them get in there and dig it out, pick and shovel. Couldn't trust convicts with explosives. They heated the whole damn prison and kept its cook stoves fired up with that jackleg mine.

But the county found out somehow about the other kids and there was a man at the door about them going to the school they kept down in Jericho.

"Nah," he said, stepping out and pulling the door to behind him. No slick-soled dandy from Fairmont was getting into his house. "I don't hold with books."

He remembered his days, sitting hot and restless while some old woman stood up there and ranted on and on. What good did learning to read and write do him now, digging coal? Sally could help her mother, the boys could do chores. Why do all that work himself, spend the dough school cost him—a nickel here, a dime there? It added up. No point to it. And times were hard.

It took the county a bunch of visits and a warrant before he decided it would be cheaper to give in than pay the fines. Cost him for clothes, shoes that could make the long walk. When Mary found out the other kids were collecting bits of food for their lunch, she fussed till he agreed to let her send along a portion of beans for them to share. Sally got special attention from one of the teachers who thought she was extra-bright. Too big for her britches right away. He heard her one night reading to her mam out in the kitchen. Didn't she have work to do?

"It's writ out on stone in the middle of the desert, Mam. Maybe held a statue once, but now teacher says it just sits there, emptiness all around. 'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.'"

"What you saying? What's that quare name, girlie?" Something about it grabbed him. He never heard the like, even from foreigners at the mine, but sitting on his mound, thinking about the old feller lying beneath him that it must have been built in honor of, he got to be certain he was the king of the Indians. Sally's poem with its 'king of kings' tickled his memory somehow.

"My name—," she started.

"Shit—not that part. What's that man's name?"

She crouched down a little in her chair, bent her head over her book. She had her mother's dirty blonde hair and scrunched down when he spoke, like her mother, like a woman should.

"Ozymandias, Pap." Her watery blue eyes, like her mam's, darted up at him.

"Spell it out now." She knew what he meant.

"O-zee-man-dee-us?" She looked up. "Shall I spell it again?"

"Nah. I got it. Oh-Zee-Man-Deus. What else you say? King of Kings?"

She nodded, "Yes, Pap. You want me to ask Miz Nell some more about him?" The thump she made on the floor was satisfying.

Just sitting there, that mound wasn't good for much. Somebody important had to be buried in there. Big dog of all the Indians that lived along the Monongahela here. Sitting up there, Clive shook off the leavings of the dust-filled, gassy shift just past. What would it be like to be a king, with them all carrying him fish from the river, the grain they grew, and deer from the mountains? Golden cups he drank from, a plush bearskin for his bed. Like a king, ordering them to build something that would call out to anybody going up or down the river that he had been here. "Ozymandias. King of Kings." He liked that. Back to himself, he liked thinking he owned the memory of some big shot.

Clive Junior got himself killed in that fool mine in Moundsville. Bud went off to war before the draft, hardly said goodbye. Two Army officers asked around Catawba to find the house and tell Mary he died. Too soon for it to be in a battle. No Purple Heart, no nothing. Just picked a fight in his camp down in Texas. Why wasn't it just as honorable to die fighting a nigger as a Jap?

That left Sally and Bill at home. Clive fought Mary from the start: Bill was her last, her baby, and she would call him Billy. Sissy name. He wanted his boys to jump to short names when he spoke. Hadn't taken more than a couple of swats to cure Mary of that. "Clive honey," she started calling him when they got hitched. Everybody in his house—and that meant Mary and Sally, as well as the boys—did what he said when he said it. He held off hitting Mary and Sally unless they forced him to, but the boys early on got to know the feel of his fist—or foot. And the boys were Clive Junior. Bud. And Billy? Goddam foolishness. *Bill*. Big as his pappy these days and still growing, but with a mean look in his eye whenever he saw his mam getting what she deserved. Clive pondered how he was going to manage a boy bigger than he was. He'd learn the right way to handle his own old lady, though, and thank him.

As if he didn't have enough trouble, one day some fool college professor showed up at his door. Introduced himself, Charlie Barnes, department of something he'd never heard of. Showed him his name on a blue card. Clive kept him outside the door, like the school people from Fairmont. Only this gent was from the university up in Morgantown, come to talk about his mound, he said. "Beautiful little example," he started off. Clive had to shut the door more than half way before the professor reached in his pocket. He let him talk.

He wanted to dig into Clive's mound. Clive was still shaking his head when the professor climbed back into his shiny new Studebaker and drove off. Nobody was rucking around inside his mound. But later when he climbed up to take in the sweep of his kingdom, shake off cramped darkness from work, somehow Ozymandias didn't satisfy him. He itched to find out more. One word stuck: Library. The library at the university up in Morgantown had stuff from other mounds. And more to see. Pictures? Articles? Books?

"We can display what we find in your mound, too." Like professor Charlie was promising him a crown.

He might go up there one day, see if he could find it. In Morgantown one time on some Union deal, he didn't see any university. While he was mulling over the idea, here came Sally climbing out of a car full of giggling girls. She headed into the house.

She got big ideas from that teacher, including running to town with other girls. She said. He was watching her. Today, he wasn't surprised to see her sashay in dressed in a skimpy skirt, with a little scrap of cloth tied behind her neck on top. Her tits showing through the material. He put down his beer and followed her to her room.

"Who said you could go around in clothes like that, girlie?" he asked her, quiet-like. Her shoulders hunched and she looked at the floor. By God, he might have to dig coal for a living, but his family was going to be decent.

"Jane Crowther gave them to me. She got some new things, didn't want these."

"Who *said* . . .?" She looked up, sniffing already. His belt was in his hand. Then he got a better idea. "Go around looking like a whore, you want to know what a whore does, don't you?"

"No, pap," she said, whimpering already. "I'll put on a blouse. I'll do what you want. Just leave me be."

He showed her what she wanted to know. She fought him, hard, scratched like a wild cat. He ended up having to stuff that sexy top into her mouth to keep her quiet. When he got done, he stood up and looked at her. She didn't look so good.

"Dress like that and that is what you get," he said. "Go wash your face. Straighten yourself up and dress decent." He felt good. He'd wanted to do this for a long time.

"And if your mam asks you anything, some stranger in town done it." She covered herself and slunk by him.

Now he'd done it, he felt like Sally might stand in for Mary some times. Four babies had left Mary loose, like an old sow. When he got a flat, a large-size hole meant a new tire. He couldn't toss Mary into the creek with old bedsprings and tires, regardless. Sally, now . . . . Maybe he could persuade Mary that now Sally was growing up, he had a responsibility to teach her . . . . Let them swap beds. Now and then.

But Sally must have told her mam, because Mary started sneaking ugly looks at him. Before he could bring her mother around, Sally was off in Fairmont, living with that damn Miz Nell. He got nothing out of Mary when he asked, except more cringing. With a school teacher messing in his family, that warrant still on his mind, he put it off for a while. Made sure he used Mary plenty in the meantime, though.

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Once he got onto the state road, Morgantown was an easy drive. The university was right downtown, its buildings bunched together in a circle of dark, old-looking structures. Some kid looked at him funny before he pointed at the building. The doorway was hid back under an arch. More kids on the steps, some of the girls dressed as indecent as Sally. They kept looking at him. He'd cleaned up, but figured he stuck out, being older. Lots of miners' sons, veterans on the GI Bill, came here, so what were they staring at? Finally a nigger in a blue uniform came along, cleaning up trash.

"Anybody can go in there, right, boy?" He jerked his head at the entrance. The man stood and raised his stick a little. He squinted up and down Clive's full length. Clive clenched his fists, ready to let fly. A couple of students were paying attention, halfway to their feet. He relaxed his hands.

"Anybody can read and got a good reason, I reckon can go ask," the man drawled. Clive hawked and missed the man's foot by an inch, looked him in the eye and mounted the stairs.

Inside at the desk a line of students carried books. Books lined the room and the balcony up above, and students with more books came down halls that went off either

way. Once the lady behind the counter caught on to what he was looking for, things moved along smoothly. She spoke into a phone, and a man wearing the same uniform as the nigger, but white, showed him down a hall to another room. A big sign that said ADENA MOUND CULTURE stood on an easel by the door. Around the room were funny shaped tables that held glass boxes high up.

Inside the boxes were little signs he had trouble reading, alongside some stone carvings. One shaped like an animal was some kind of a pipe. And some black crumbs of “psychoactive” tobacco, whatever that was. “First farming in North America.” A stone bracelet. Stone? He spelled out “Agriculture” over rotted plants like “wild barley.” Poor hungry bunch of folks, they must have been. Here he’d had Ozymandias feasting on Indian corn and fish and deer meat. Sprawled in comfort, kicking back whatever they brewed from a gold cup.

The jewelry they wore that wasn’t stone, turned out to be copper. Nothing pretty, but worn only by chiefs. Was that the best they could do? This was cruddy stuff, all right. He was about to head out to find where he parked his truck, when a girl, looked like a student but wearing a badge, came to stand by him at the table that held some bowls.

“Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” she said. He was stuck for an answer.

“Amazing, how?” he asked. She looked straight at him through her glasses, not dodging his glance like most women.

“Well, the fact that this bowl has held together more than two thousand years when they didn’t even bake it in the first place,” she said. “I consider that amazing.” He had made bowls like the one she pointed to in kindergarten by rolling a long clay rope and making a spiral with it.

“Tippy-looking, ain’t it?” His came out a lot better, too.

“It sat under a pile of dirt long enough to be tippy, I’d say.” The little laugh she gave was superior and he wanted to smack her the way he smacked Mary and Sally when they spoke to him like that.

“I can show you pictures of some that look a lot better, if you’re interested.” Not “if you want to see them” or “if you have the time,” but sounding like a school teacher who set him in the dummies’ row. His distaste grew into a slow burn. How smart would she be if he tore off those glasses and threw them down?

“Sure you can spare the time, ma’am?” he said softly. Below the ugly face he saw a pair of tits straining hard against whatever she wore under her blouse. He forced a smile.

“Everybody’s out of here, off to the big game,” she said. Too smart to watch a game, besides? She looked critically at his hands. “You could maybe take a second to clean up. These are archival materials.” How would those clean hands feel on her skin?

He looked around, like he was trying to find the wash room. No one else was in this wing. “You think they’re not above my level, ma’am?” Was that a flicker of suspicion in her eyes? He kept on smiling, simple-like.

“Oh, they’re a set of beautiful pictures. Wait till you see them.” She pointed. “Right over there’s the men’s room.” Just wait.

She pulled a set of keys from her pocket and led him back between some book shelves that reached the ceiling. Nice ass, the way she walked. She was asking for it. On her tiptoes, she almost staggered under the heavy volume. The desk she took it to was tucked into a corner by a window. She shoved a pile of smaller books to one side, then brushed the dust off her hands.

“People sign up for a carrel and think they have a license to make a mess.”

A real fussybudget. Put him right back in a classroom, too big for the desk they gave him, being scolded for being untidy. He saw black curls left behind on her neck

when she pulled her hair up into a bun. All of a sudden it was hard to breathe. Could she tell? The rag he'd wiped his hands with was in his back pocket. It would work just as good as Sally's sexy top.

"Look there." She stood back, her hand bracing the book open to show the picture of a bowl that spread across two pages. He dragged his eyes from her tits to the photograph, sliding his hand toward his pocket. He had her trapped in the small space. He took a deep breath, as he yanked at the stubborn cloth, and she spun on one foot, catching him off balance.

"Oh, silly of me. I forgot. The really good books are—," and before he got the rag all the way out, she slipped past him. Her heels clicking on the tile, she ran, calling over her shoulder, "—up here by the main desk. Come along." He took off after her, out-foxed for the moment, but still ready.

She was behind the front desk before he caught up. Still smiling, chin up, she said briskly, "The security guard can bring you what you want." Her voice shook, though. She was pressing so hard on the base of the phone, her thumb turned white. When he tried to open the gate behind the desk, he found she had locked it. He heard a buzz.

"Barney?" Her voice echoed on the building's loudspeaker. "The gentleman up here needs some assistance. Thank you." She looked at him across the barricade. Her chest heaved. Her smile was frozen in place.

"Silly of me." She pulled her shoulders back, standing almost his height. The white man's running feet slapped on the hall floor. At the same time, the door closed behind the nigger who'd been cleaning out front. It was nothing for Clive to throw him off his feet with one sweep of his arm on his way out the door.

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His breathing still ragged, to stay upright he had to claw into the soft dirt of his mound. Seated, finally, he looked around his kingdom. The shining river dulled. All he saw was its border of railroad tracks, shabby houses clustered along the road, the mound no longer sheltering his own. Late afternoon, his favorite time of day, dimmed. He swallowed great gobs of air. Blackness dotted the picture. He tried to blink it clear. Ozymandias never had to bolt down Morgantown's main street. Never left a season's rubber behind on the asphalt, streaking out of town. Hadn't the king of kings just pointed out the one he wanted, sure she'd be his? Quaffed deeply from his leaky clay cup?

Night came on fast, too fast. Blinking still wouldn't clear it away. He, Clive Tolliffe, wanted a beer.

"Mary," he called, choking, but the puny sound that came out frightened him.

"Bill," he tried. Where the hell was Bill? What had made him hide his truck and sneak up here? Nobody from that university would chase him this far, clean over the county line.

Where was his family? He could go down to his house, demand his rightful meal, his drink, his pleasure in bed. No, goddammit, it would take more than this silly play-acting by those two to make him wait on himself. He tried to yell again, but the miserable croak he made died in his throat.

He leaned forward to rise. His legs had frozen under him. The night kept closing in, all around him. No lights in houses below, or in the sky above him. No lights anywhere. No houses. His voice failed him again. Where were they? Had they gone off and left him?

Was nobody ever going to come?