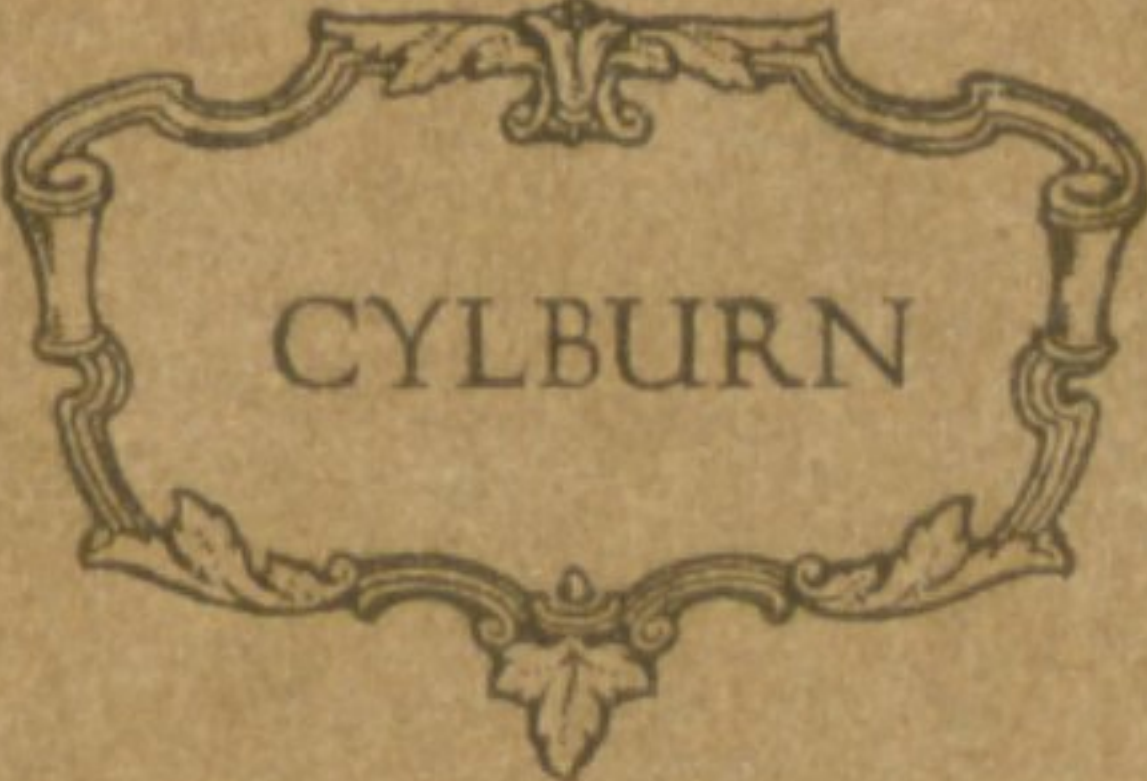




The MIRRORS OF
BENSBORO

BRUCE COTTEN



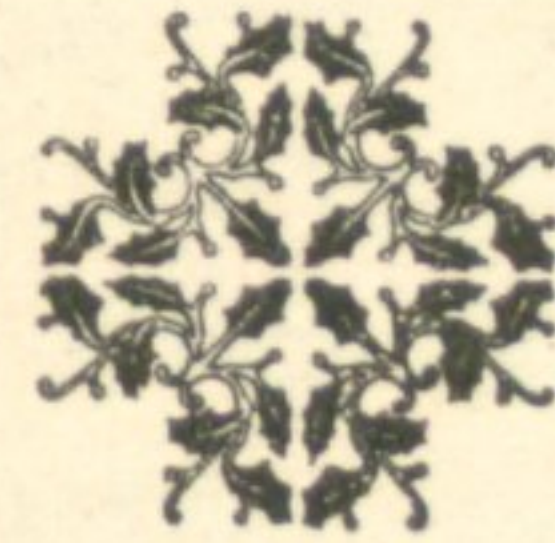
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THE MIRRORS of
BENSBORO

By
BRUCE COTTEN



CHRISTMAS 1925
CYLBURN

THE MIRRORS OF BENSBORO

ACROSS the river from Cottendale, our plantation home in North Carolina, lay the old plantation of Bensboro. It was one of the earliest spots settled on the river and was the seat of the Atkinson family for a hundred and fifty years.

As a boy I heard many tales of the past greatness of Bensboro, tales of the gentry and beauty that assembled from far and near, and the magnificence of the entertainments given there. It was a notable home for a hundred years; then came the Civil War and it faded and died like a rose in the desert.

As I remember it, the old great house still stood, though much dilapidated and decayed. There were remnants of a box garden in front and rear, and some giant magnolias, here and there, stood reminders of those days when lace stocks bowed to hoop-skirts and the touch of her hand in the old Virginia reel gave a soul joy and thrill lost to us of today. Many broad acres had

grown up in pines and brush that hid the long rows of cabins, now falling and in decay through neglect and the ravages of time.

About 1895 the house was burned and today there is not a remnant left of this place which for a hundred and fifty years was a luxurious and exclusive home of the old order of Dixie. Some time after the old house had been burned, I crossed the river one day for a ride through the fields and met Old Uncle Ben, one of the very few Atkinson negroes left in the community. Uncle Ben was delighted to see me and we had a long talk about the old place and "de times befo de war."

As we neared the place where the old house had stood I asked him how it happened to be burned, and he said: "Lord! Mr. Bruce, dat is er long story. Fer you ter understand dat, you'el habe ter go back ter de time when I wuz a suckin' babe in my mammy's arms."

"You mean to tell me that the causes of this fire had its beginnings back when you were a child?"

"Yes, sar, dats jes what I mean."

"Well, Uncle Ben, I will sit right here and you will tell me the whole thing."

"Well, sar, in de fus place, Mr. Bruce, if you think I au'ter, I would like ter say dat in what I's gwine tell you, I don't mean no 'flection on no white folks. Most 'ticular I don't mean no 'flection on no 'oman folks. Den in de second place, cose you know dat niggers got no edecation, yet niggers know er lot 'bout heap'er things dat white folks don't know 'tall, en if some white folks would listen ter niggers, now and den, dey would be heap better off den dey is."

"I agree with you, Uncle Ben, in that and I promise you that what you tell me here along these lines will be held strictly confidential, and I will never speak of it to a soul as long as you live."

"Well, den I will say to com'ence wid, dat de burning ob dis here house started way back yander when Marse Ben married Miss Becca Tunstall en fotched her here as er bride.

"You see, Marse Ben, up at de springs, he meet Miss Becca Tunstall, en she

wuz er mighty pretty young 'oman en powerful rich in niggers en land, en de most sprit'ly young 'oman you eber seed. All de rich white gentlemens wuz er-coaten her en where eber she go de men jes swarm er-bout like bees atter honey. Marse Ben, he say to himself dat he gwine ter marry her, en a whole pacl'er tothers say dey gwine ter marry her, too, so de coaten wuz mighty libely.

"But Miss Becca say dat she like 'em all, en she jes keep de hibe a swarming en buzzin' er-bout. But Marse Ben wuz mighty swasive when it comes ter 'omen folks, en he mighty sly wid de gals en 'sperianced fo dis. So bime-by, sho nuff, he out talk 'em all, en Miss Becca say she gwine marry him.

"He wuz mighty proud when he come home en fix up de garden en de house fer de bride, den he en Sam went up ter Virginia fer de wedding.

"Atter a while dey come home, en all de niggers went up ter de great house fer ter see de Missis. She come out on de poach en speak to dem all, en pat some ob de chilluns on de head. She

say she mighty lucky to git Marse Ben en she mighy glad ter see so many likely niggers 'bout. She was de most beautiful young 'oman you eber seed, en I speck er-bout twenty, while Marse Ben wuz most ober forty den.

"Well, pretty soon she brung down some ob her Virginia niggers, en Cindy de prettiest little yaller gal you eber seed fer house maid. When dem Virginia niggers git in de quarters you neber seed such carrying on in all your born days. Dey wuz de stuck-uppest niggers you eber seed. Dey say dat de Norf Calina niggers no good fer nuffin', dat dey jes de trash sold off from Virginia, en dey wipe dair feet on Norf Calina niggers eber day in Virginia. De say de land no good, de quarters no good, en nuffin' no good in Norf Calina like 'tis in Virginia.

"Den one nite de whole crowd wuz ober ter Sis Mandy's fer prayer-meeting, en er big black buck, he up en say dat eben de gals no good in Norf Calina. Dat wuz too much. Big Jim Hook, he up en busted him ober de head wid er

club. You ought ter seed dat nigger drap, en den they all begin ter fight en dey fit en dey fought 'till dem Virginia niggers wuz beat to a pulp. It look more like hog-killin' time 'round Sis Mandy's dat nite dan er prayer-meeting.

"But dat's gittin' 'way from de pint. Miss Becca, she fotched down a whole passel ob furn'ture en put it in de house en three mirrors. Dey wuz mighty fine mirrors, backed wid eel skin en beeswax en sot in solid gold frames, most big as your leg. Dey put one in de hall, one in de parlor en one ober de fire place in de dining room.

"Dey wuz mighty fine ter look at, but dare sho wuz de devil in dem mirrors. Mirrors don't go wid niggers no how, dey sho brings bad luck, en to white folks too, atter a while. You let a wall-eyed nigger look in er mirror, en what'el happen ter him will most 'stonish you. Uncle Dempsy looked in one ob dem mirrors en wuz stricken wid er misery fer six months, den dare wuz old man Peter, he looked in one ob dem

mirrors one day when he wuz er-bout de house en he neber had no peace 'till he die, he wuz jes stricken wid de shakin' paulsy like, en so it goes.

"Well, atter Miss Becca married Marse Ben, dey seem mighty happy. Miss Becca she wuz mighty gay en liked comp'ny all de time en all de gentlemens er-bout wuz er-comin' en er-goin', en dare wuz sho some good times on de old place in dose days. En Miss Becca, she like de men too, en she act mighty free wid some ob dem, do, cose, dare wuz no suspectibility 'bout dat. She jes young en playful yit, like er kitten en pretty as er June peach.

"Den Marse Ben fotched er young gentlemen from up in Edgcombe down here, he wuz er cousin ob Marse Ben's named Jim Bunn, en beanst his fader en mudder wuz both dead, Marse Ben put him in charge ob his business, his store en ferry en de post office. He wuz sho a likely young gentlemen, en 'twont no time fo he had all de gals in de county on de run. He tuck wid de wimmens like de measels, en when he dressed up 'twont no resistivating him 'tall.

“Fo’ long, Miss Becca say dat Mr. Jim must lib at de house, stead ob de store, fer de air pretty bad on de riber at nite en full ob ’larier. So Mr. Jim, he eat at de great house en sleep in one ob de spair rooms.

“Atter er while seem like Mr. Jim tarry at de house mo den at de store, more ’ticular when Marse Ben er way, en some ob de niggers took on en talked on de sly en say dat Miss Becca she like Mr. Jim. But cose dat’s jes natual, since Mr. Jim’s Marse Ben’s cousin en it won’t no ’casion ter talk.

“Well, things went on dis way, ladies en gentlemens er comin’ en er goin’. Den one day Marse Ben he come in de hall en he jes ’casioned ter took in dat mirror, en he see Sam in de dining room er tustlin’ en er fumblin’ wid dat little yaller gal, Cindy. Cose dat don’t make no ’ticular difference sept dey break some ob de dishes or such. Marse Ben say nuffin’ to Sam, but it ’peared like it put him thinkin’ ’bout supen on his mind, en he kept movin’ en tiltin’ dat mirror ’till he could see bofe in de parlor and

in de dinin’ room. Sam seed dis en knewed it all, en he let Cindy ’lone atter dat, sept in de kitchen, ob course, or some such like place.

“Atter dis de splosion come. Marse Ben come in de hall one day en he look up at dat mirror, en lo-en-beho what do he see? It wont Sam dis time—no, sar—it wont Sam, but lease dat mirror lied, he see Miss Becca herself on de parlor sofa, en dat wont all. Well, I sho hates ter say it, but twix you en me, Mr. Jim wuz sitin’ right wid her en dey wuz clinched in er kiss right dare on dat sofa es sweet as honey pie.

“Marse Ben say nuffin’ but sorter coughed like en called Sam. Den he went out ob de back door en sont fer de oberseah, en told him ter go down in de quarters en hoop some of dem Virginia niggers, den he walk down in de field, his face mighty flushed en den he come back en sont fer Mr. Jim, en he tell Mr. Jim dat he ’sided ter close up de store, en de ferry, en de post office, en he close dem up now, en he very sorry dat he do not need Mr. Jim no mo, en

he pay him off his wages en tell Mr. Jim he better go back ter Edgcombe dat nite, case its sorter crowded 'round here.

"Dat nite, at supper, Sam say dat Marse Ben wuz mighty quiet en curious like, but he very polite, en atter supper he bowed ter Miss Becca en axed her ter walk wid him in de garden. Miss Becca, she smile en take his arm. Dey sot in de rose arber en Sam crope up in de ceder hedge es close as he could, case he knowed dat supen wuz wrong, de Virginia niggers all hooped fer nuffin', Mr. Jim, he gone en all dat. He cud'ent hear all dey say but he hear Miss Becca crying en den Marse Ben took her in his arms en kiss her en say he know dat shes er good 'oman en de purest little 'oman in de world, only she jest a child yit en er little foolish now en den. 'Peared like he wuz forgibbing her fer supen, which Mars Ben ought ter do case he sho had some time wid de gals hisself fo dis.

"Den atter while, Marse Ben he talked very serious like en say dey

gwine ter start all ober agin. He say dey got plenty ob land, well stocked wid niggers, en all de good things in life, but dey got no child, no heir. Dat 'sturb him much he say case if dey have no heir all de niggers will habe ter be sold en scattered 'bout, en Marse Ben, he neber sell er nigger he jes keep 'em all.

"Miss Becca listen ter all dis wid her head on his arm, en bime-by dey start fer de house. When dey come in, Marse Ben say dat he gwine ter take down dat mirror in de hall, case it's er lyin' mirror en he wont hab no lyin' mirror 'bout him, nor lyin' folks nutter fer dat. But Miss Becca, she stop him en say, 'No, dat mirror neber told a lie,' en she very 'ticular want it ter stay where it wuz, so Marse Ben 'lowed it her way.

"Atter dat things wuz mighty good 'roun' de old place. Marse Ben seemed mighty cheerful en Miss Becca too, en Miss Becca would go down in de quarters eber week en speck de cabins, en she call de wimens en chilluns out, en she say to some ob de wimens, 'you

wash dat little nigger right now en dat one too, en scower dis cabin today.' It was sho a sight to see her movin' 'bout wid all dose little niggers 'bout her, like a swarm er flies. I kin see her now, en she jump on de oberseah, too, wid both feet en make him wash his chilluns en move de trash out'er his back yard.

"Den atter a while it got out dat Miss Becca wuz in her acoutment. Dare wuz great joysin' in de quarters, Marse Ben gwine ter hab an heir en de niggers would all stay at home atter his death en not be sold off ter traders en scattered in de cane brakes down south. So dare wuz de highest expectionation ob de 'vent.

"Finally, Old Dr. Randolph come ober, en de niggers would hardly work fer waiting fer news from de great house.

"Miss Becca, she told Marse Ben ter wait in his office en fer no inducement she wish him ter come ter her 'till she sont fer him. Marse Ben, he do jes like Miss Becca say, doe he got mighty figity en walked de floor drinking brandy en er smoking his pipe. Den finely Cindy

come en say ter Marse Ben dat Miss Becca wish him ter go ter de front door en ter look in de mirror, please. Marse Ben thought Cindy foolish en axed her agin, den he go to de front door en look en dat mirror. What do he see? Well, sar. It wuz de beat'nst thin' He seed sitin' on de parlor sofa, Old Aunt Penny, en dat ain't all. She had in her arms de finest boy baby you eber seed in all your born days, en he wuz de splittin' image ob Marse Ben, en dat wuz de fus time he eber seed his only son en heir, right in date same mirror, praise be ter God.

"Dey named young Masse Peyton Tunstall Atkinson, atter his grandady up yander in Virgina. I wuz er small boy den, but 'members well 'bout it. Marse Peyton, he grow up de finest young gentlemen eber raised in dese parts, en dey wont no more trouble 'bout dem mirrors fer er long time, sept triflin' things, such as Sis Mandy's speriance. She look in dat mirror one day en had er baby, what had glass eyes born ter her in er week, den dare wuz

Bro. Epham, he look in dat mirror one day, when he wuz er-bout de house, en er chilblane come on his neck, most big as your fist, en atter a while it choked him ter def. 'Tain't no use er talkin' mirrors don't go wid niggers. I nebber look at er mirror sept I close my left eye, but most people don't know dat.

"Marse Peyton, he grow up en dey sont him way yander ter college, en when he come back he wuz de most liked young gentleman in de county. All de rich white gals wuz atter him, en de po ones too, fer dat, but it 'peared like he liked Miss Susan Streater better den all en I had ter drike him ober ter Green County eber week ter see Miss Susan, sept when dey's off to de springs.

"Miss Susan wuz de richest young 'oman in ten counties, en de likeles besides. She had more niggers den you could count. She had niggers ob all colors—red, white en blue, black en tan, yaller, domineck en ginger cake. She had niggers what she had cotched down in Afrika, or some'ers, en dey could'ent talk nuttin' dat nobody eber heard 'bout,

en some ob dem wuz de wus conjer niggers dat eber libed. Den she had er bunch ob dem Ingin half-breed niggers dat some Yankees fotched down here en sold ter old Col. Debro, ober on Roan-Oak, so she had eber sort of nigger in de world, I spect, en land all up yander in Edgcombe en Halifax, sides dat ober in Green County en Beaufort en Craven. So Miss Susan wuz mighty pop'lar where eber she go, wid all de white gentlemens atter her en trying ter marry her. Cose dey got no chance atter Marse Peyton step in, but dey keep er tryin' all de same. Jes jumping er-bout like er lot ob chickens wid de necks rung off.

"Den while all dis wuz gwine on, Miss Susan, wid her mudder, come ober ter Bensboro fer ter visit our folks fer er week. 'Twas a mighty fine time, en when she come she fotched de finest pair ob sorrels in de county, er de State e'der as dat goes. En she fotched too, wid her on dat trip, as hand maid, de likeless little gal I eber seed, a little 'cosin gal, black as er huckleberry en spry as er

cricket. I wuz stable boy den en I sho did go atter dat gal. But dat ain't de pint."

"But, Uncle Ben, didn't you marry that girl Tilly?"

"Well—yes, sar, I did. Den agin I did'ent. I did marry her 'corden ter slabery rights, but atter freedom dey figered out dat dat did'ent hold. Word come 'round dat all de niggers had ter git married ober agin en have licens, en Tilly kept atter me fer ter go ter town ter git de licens. She pestered de life outer me, so atter while I went ter town. But when I got dare I find dat licens cost \$2.20, jes one ob dose zor-bant tax dey put on niggers case dey's free. Well, I could'ent see no use ob payin' \$2.20 fer ter marry de 'oman you all'ers had, so I walk out ob de court house ter study 'bout it, en I seed Old Man Handy's gal Rody come santerin' 'long all dressed up ter kill. I all'ers liked dat gal some how or nudder, so I axed her how she git ter town en so on, en den atter some little talk back en forthwise, I went in en got licens

ter marry Rody en we got married right dare.

"But I lef her, too, atter a while, fer she 'veloped ter be de flesh en de devil dat dey spake er-bout in de Holy Writ. Den I jined de church fer ter purge my soul en I ain't nebber had nuffin' ter do wid 'omen folks since den.

"But, as I wuz gwine on ter say. When Miss Susan en her mudder come ter Bensboro, Marse Peyton sont me ter town wid er note fer Col. Yeladay en fer Marse Edward Harris, which say dat Miss Susan Streater wid her mudder wuz er visitin' Bensboro en he be mighty glad if dey both come up en spen' Sunday wid him.

"Dis wuz sho er curious thin' fer Marse Peyton ter do, case Col. Yeladay en Marse Edward both wuz suters fer Miss Susan's hand en heart en land en niggers, en dey both mighty pop'lar gentlemens 'sides. Sho thing I wont nebber vite no 'nother nigger ter come 'round when I's wid my best gal, least-wise dare be trouble. But Marse Peyton, I speck, knewed he already had

Miss Susan, so he vite dem up case dey's all mighty good friends wid one ernudder, en he 'lowed he'd let dem down sorter easy.

"Dey come on Saturday en Miss Susan wuz mighty p'lite ter dem all, jes a smilin' at one en den er bowin' at de tother, en such like. Dat ebenin' when de sun got low, Marse Peyton, he took Col. Yeladay dow ter de riber fer ter see de new ferry boat, en when dey come back, Col. Yeladay enter de hall en jes 'casioned ter look in dat mirror. Well, sar—what do he see? Miss Susan sitin' on de parlor sofa en Marse Edward right dare wid her. I don't say dey wuz er huggin' or er kissin' or nuffin' like dat. Maybe dey wuz en maybe dey wuz'ent. Dey's both dead now, en I don't nebber talk 'bout no dead folks. Howe-some-eber, Col. Yeladay looked mighty sprized like en turned most red es er beat.

"De next day Marse Edward, he come down ter de stable fer ter see his nag, en when he come back in de hall he jes look in dat mirror hisself, accident like, en

what do he see? Well, I don't talk 'bout no dead folks en I don't say what he see, only Miss Susan wuz er sitin' on dat same sofa en Col. Yeladay wuz jam up wid her, like er honey bee.

"De devil sho broke loose in dem mirrors agin. Marse Edward looked mighty 'sprized, en mad too, en say dat he got ter go ter town right er-way en sont Sam ter tell me ter fetch his nag. Den Col. Yeladay lebe too, but dey don't go ter gather like dey come. 'Oman folks can sho do a heap er harm in dis world, if de ain't 'ticular wid de selfs.

"Soon atter dis Marse Edward stood fer de legislater, en some say dat Col. Yeladay ain't gwine ter s'port him. Den Marse Edward write him a note en axed him if he gwine s'port him fer de legislater, en Col. Yeladay answer back—'No.' Den follow one thin' en er nudder 'till Marse Edward say his honor been 'flected on en he write Col. Yeladay a chalange fer ter fight er duel.

"I ain't nebber seed how he calculated dat his honor wuz 'flected on, case no one cuss him or 'cuse him ob stealin'

nuffin' or lyin' 'bout nuffin'. So how wuz his honor 'flected on? Anyhow, he 'lowed dat his honor been 'flected on en he en Col. Yeladay gwine stand up en shoot at one tother wid pistols. Sho thin' any nigger 'flectin' on me 'cusin' me ob stealin' en such like, when I ain't done it, I ain't gwine ter stand up dare en let dat nigger shoot at me, not much, 'tain't natual. I jes wait 'till I ketch him in de dark en I bust him plum open wid a mall.

"Marse Peyton, when he hear'd it all, went ter town en seed 'em both en tried ter patch it up, but dey would'ent patch en got mad wid him, so he say he ain't gwine ter hab nuffin' ter do wit it no mo.

"De day wuz panted en dey wuz ter meet up yander on de Dismal Swamp. Dey wuz both mighty dead shots. Marse Edward, he rode 'long ter de place panted, en eber few miles he stuck er ace ob harts up on er tree en jes shoot de hart out ob it at one clip, en den lebe it dare fer Col. Yeladay ter see when he come 'long. Col. Yeladay, when he seed dese aces ob harts all 'long de road,

he stop eber time, en he stick up er jack ob spades right side it, en jes shoot de left eye out, clean as a whip. I ain't nebber liked de ace ob harts since den, en if I draw one in er hand ter dis day, I throw it right down, but de jack ob spades is er nother thing. B'leve me, I'll put my last cent on er jack ob spades eber time.

"Well, ter come ter de pint, dey met on de day panted. Col. Yeladay, he jes fired his pistol in de air en let Marse Edward shoot at him pint blank. But some how or nudder, Marse Edward miss him clean. 'Tain't no use er talkin', dis here shootin' flesh en blood ain't like shootin' de ace ob harts stuck ter er tree.

"Den atter dis shot, Col. Yeladay sont Dr. Blow ober ter Marse Edward en axed him if his honor satesfied, en Marse Edward say, 'no,' dat he come dare fer blood en blood he gwine ter hab. At dat, Col. Yeladay jes fotched hissself up straight—like dis—en at de word fire he pop er ball right in Marse Edward's left eye en drap him dead as er door nail.

“My ’tis terable de trouble ’omen folks can ’casion when dey ain’t ’ticular wid de selfs, but I speck dem mirrors cast a spell ober dem too, en b’leve me, dis time dey done supen.

“Well, atter dis Marse Ben die and Old Missis, she sicken en die, en dem mirrors shivered en shivered. Seem like sometime dey break demselves frum shivering.

“Den soon Marse Peyton, he marry Miss Susan, spiten all de trouble she ’casioned, en fotched her ter Bensboro as mistress. Dey wuz er mighty fine lookin’ pair, but somehow luck wuz all agin ’em. Dare come er blue moon de nite ob de wedding en when I seed it, I went in where de wedding wuz gwine on, en all de folks joysin’ en carrin’ on, en I whispered ter Marse Peyton dat er big blue moon wuz er comin’ up through de woods. He say, ‘What kin we do ’bout it?’ en I ’vised him ter gib me er dollar fer ter show ter de moon. Marse Peyton smiled en slipped me er dollar en went right back ter de bride, but it wuz one ob dem Mexican trade dollars, what

dey uste ter hab er-bout, en it wont no good ter de moon, so things looked mighty bad wid dem frum de fus. Den dose mirrors took er swetin’ en we all knowed dat dare wuz heap ob trouble comin’.

“De fus baby die, en de second baby die, en de third baby die too, atter three years. When dat little gal die, Becca, day called her atter old Missis, you wont b’leve me, but when dat little Misse die, dem mirrors turned black as I is, en Miss Susan weep en weep en say dat her light gone out fer eber. But de next child libed en we all thought de spell wuz broke.

“Den de war come on en it wuz er mighty troubled time wid us all. Marse Peyton went ter de war en fought wid Genel Lee, but he wuz tuck mighty sick, en when he come home he did’ent weigh no mo den ninety pounds. But Miss Susan, she tuck charge ob de whole place, en, b’leve me, dem niggers had ter work. Miss Susan had got ’ligion when she fus married Marse Peyton, en built er meetin’ house, one fer de whites en

one fer de blacks; but when de war come on seem like she lost it most. She 'lowed dat, 'all de dam Yankees in hell can't take my niggers frum me.' En I don't speck dey could sept she suffer wid de rhumatiz now, right smart.

"Marse Peyton got wuss en wusser en went up to de springs, en dem mirrors jes swet en swet. When de Yankees took New Bern dem mirrors swet er week.

"Den one day, Miss Susan come in de house en look in dat mirror in de hall en fell right down dare in er faint. Jack en Tilly fotched some water en de brandy bottle, en when Miss Susan come to, she weep en mourn en say dat Marse Peyton's dead, dat she seed him in de mirror in his shroud, en dat Tom is ridin' all nite ter nite to fetch de news ter her. Den she weep en mourn like she die.

"'Twas sho a curious thing, but as true as er fact. She sont me ter meet Tom wid er fresh horse. It wuz old Christmas nite en I ain't nebber forgit dat nite es long es I lib. I rode Dick en

lead Selim fer Tom ter ride back. I's seed many curious things on old Christmas nite, but I ain't nebber seed such as I seed dat nite. All er long de road de cows wuz down on dare knees a pray-in' ter de Lord, en de hogs wuz runin' 'bout barkin' like dogs. Some ob de trees wuz er standin' upside down, en up yander at de Old Gum Church most a hundred dead folks wuz up out ob de graves jes sitin' 'round in dare shrouds. Lord, it was sights I seed dat nite. I jes shot my eyes en pop de spurs ter old Dick.

"'Bout day, I got up on de old plank road, jes dis side ob Col. Olds' place, when, sho nuff, here come Tom er flyin'—licky split—ridin' Bonny Blue Flag. He say dat Marse Peyton wuz dead at Shocker Springs, dat he pray fer us all fo he die, en dat Bonny run all de way from Warrenton. He tuck Selim en I lead Bonny home.

"Atter Marse Peyton's funeral, Miss Susan seemed mighty quiet en troubled. It wuz er troubled time wid us all, de witches rode de niggers mighty hard dat

winter en de Guv'ment tuck must ob de crap. But Miss Susan pick up as de spring come on, en when she talk ob de Yankees, she cuss er little en swear er little, en den she use er few oaths en say dat, 'We gwine ter lick dem damn Yankees yit.'

"Den one day dem mirrors swet all nite, en at sun-up, dey swet three drops ob pure blood. Cose we all knowed supen gwine ter happen den. Well, de very next day word come frum town dat Genel Lee done surrendered en dat de niggers wuz all free. Dat nite dare wuz er great jolification in de quarters, but Miss Susan come down dare, wid de oberseah, en hooped some ob dem, so de jolification subceasted.

"Atter 'bout er week, word come 'round fer all de niggers ter come up ter de great house. Dare wuz sho a bunch of dem, wimmens en all. Den Miss Susan come out on de poach en call dem all up nigh, en said to dem all, dat Genel Lee done surrendered en dat de niggers wus all free ter go en come as dey like. She say dat dey could work

dare if dey wished, dat dey could farm dare en dat de rashions wuz still in de smoke house. Den she likewise say dat she still de Mistress ob Bensboro en dat if any black rascal did'ent 'have hisself en do like she say, dat she gwine ter tan his black hide clean off his back, freedom er no freedom.

"Miss Susan sho knowed how ter talk ter niggers, en she done it, too, ter de day ob her death. She hoop her niggers any time, more atter freedom den befo', when dey wont specful nuff. You know dat long John Foreman? Well, he born since freedom, en Miss Susan neber ain't owned any ob his folks. One day Miss Susan come dribin' 'long de road ober by de Foreman place en she seed John plowin' out in de field. She stopped de carriage en tell de driber ter go ober dare en tell dat nigger ter come ter her. John, 'peared like, did'ent come quick nuff fer Miss Susan, so she made him take off his shirt, en den she took de carrage hoop en gin him twenty lashings right dare in de road.

John got mighty mad 'bout it, en

'lowed dat he's gwine ter hab Miss Susan 'rested. He did go ober to de Justis ob de Peace 'bout it, but Squire Willis told him dat if he fool wid Miss Susan, most likely his health gwine ter gib 'way 'round here, so John drapped his high-fangled notions en went back ter work. I wish she had gun him er thousand lashes, dat thriflin' nigger, fer Miss Susan wuz sho er good 'oman, en gone to her 'ward now.

"Atter freedom Miss Susan moved back ter her daddy's old place in Green County en she dug Marse Peyton up frum de grave yard, en little Miss Becca, en took dem wid her en buried dem at de Streater place, fer she say she can't lib nowhere sept dey's nigh. Den when young Marse Ben old nuff, she turned de place ober ter him. But de niggers all free en would'ent work en de hold place most grow up in pines en saplins. Den young Marse Ben die en de widow moven all de furnature out ob de house, sept dem mirrors, which jes hung where dey always been.

"Den one day er po white man come

'long en rent de place. I told him 'bout dem mirrors en 'vised him ter take 'em down, but he say dey look right well, en he lebe dem where dey wuz. See he's er sort er man dat don't listen ter no old nigger like me.

"He had five gals in dat family en I knowed dare wuz gwine ter be supen doing, so one day, sho nuff, de old man come in de hall en look in dat mirror, en what to his 'sprize do he see? One wuz in de parlor a huggin' en er kissin' wid old man Jim Barnes' son Jess, er nudder wuz in de dinin' room a honey-sucklin' wid dat Taylor boy, en de youngest one, dey call Sis, wuz on de side steps wid dat Bud Fisher a billin' en er cooin' like er turtal dove.

"Well, sar, de old man flew off like he's stracted. He say he don't raise no gals jes ter be hug-a-buggled er round fer nuffin, dat eber year's groth on dem gals cost him most fifty dollars, en he gwine ter know where he stand, en what's gwine on 'round here atter dis.

So he hitch up his mule en go ter town en buy hisself six more mirrors, but

dese jes lookin' glasses, wont no mirrors 'tall, doe, ob course, dey answer de purpose. He hung dem 'round in de rooms en in de hall, en put some on de cealing en 'round en er-bout, but he soon find out, from what he speck, dat he ain't got half nuff mirrors fer to cover dem gals. So he go ter town agin, en buy some mo, en he range dem all 'round de house en on de poach, en finely he got dem sot so he could sit down most any where en see all ober de place. Atter dat de gals had ter be most tickler, sept dey get behind er door or supen, en dey say dat old Missis big china closet come ter be most like a 'ception room.

"Den one day, de old man had ter go ter town, fer ter look atter his 'count. It wuz on er Thursday, en at 'leben o'clock dat day, dem old mirrors sploded like er cannon ball, en de whole house bust in fire en burne slam down ter de ground in five minutes. Seemed like it cotched eberwhere de wuz er mirror, en dare wont no time fer ter sabe nuffin'.

"I don't say what'ers gwine on dare dat morning, but dey say dat Bud

Fisher en some ob dat bunch showed up wid de hair scorched. I heard Major Peebles say dat it wuz dose mirrors, sot all er-bout jes 'flecting de sun from one to de tother en back agin, 'round en er round, gittin' hotter en hotter 'till de whole house burn up in flames.

"So you see 'tis like I say, de burnin' ob dis here house started way back yander when Marse Ben married Miss Becca Tunstall en fotched her here es er bride. She sot de train dat sploded when dem po white gals come long. I speck dare way ob coaten en such wuz too strong fer de old place, anyhow, so she jes blo up en burn down."

A strange shadow crossed Uncle Ben's dusky features as he paused at the finish. Then he added, "But 'tis better so, I speck; yes, 'tis better so. Dey's all gone now sept Old Ben en hee'l be comin' soon."

Uncle Ben has gone and for many years now, so I feel that I can tell his tale of these mirrors without "flecting" on any one. I have also investigated

his tale and find a substantial amount of truth throughout.

Benjamin Ashly Atkinson, third master of Bensboro, did marry Miss Rebecca Tunstall, a beauty of distinction in her day and connected with many of the oldest families in Virginia and North Carolina. She was a great granddaughter of Ferabee Savage, a colonial beauty in the Carolinas, and was also an "own" cousin to Mrs. C. C. Clay, whose book, "A Belle of the 50's," was extensively read a few years ago.

As for the behavior of those mirrors, I cannot vouch for all that Uncle Ben has said. It is his tale, not mine, but there are people still living who remember to have heard that there was a tell-tale mirror at Bensboro back in "de days befo' de war." The post office records disclose that the post office at Bensboro was discontinued in 1837 while a Mr. Bunn was acting postmaster.

The duel between Col. Yellowly and Mr. Harris actually occurred, as related, and while its cause was supposed to have been political, its real cause is un-

derstood to have been rivalry for Miss Streater's hand.

When Uncle Ben speaks of Tilly as "a little 'cosin gal," he means pocosin, which is a word of Indian origin used in Eastern Carolina from the earliest times to designate a swamp or marshy section. It seems to have been derived from puccoon, a shrub from which the Indians procured a dye or paint used in personal adornment.

Also, in speaking of *Old Christmas* night, Uncle Ben made a reference, the significance of which is lost, I fear, to most readers of today. However, at that time *Old Christmas* was still being celebrated to a considerable extent by the negroes and certain illiterate whites in the rural sections of the South.

It will be recalled that under the Julian calendar the year was too long, by a few minutes. The Gregorian calendar, introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, corrected this and in so doing set Christmas eleven days earlier and established leap-year to stabilize the system.

This change was not adopted in England until 1752 and in the colonies was not fully accepted until long after the Revolutionary War. In the rural sections the change was violently opposed and some of the non-conformist denominations denounced it as an ungodly interference with the seasons, a Popish plot and a sacrilege, so they continued for many years to observe the sixth of January as Christmas day. All nature is said to have resented the change, so that many negroes in the South to this day will not venture out on *Old Christmas* night, for fear of unnatural things and dreadful sights that may be encountered.

In conclusion I will add that the sofa, mentioned several times by Uncle Ben is now the property of my sister.



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