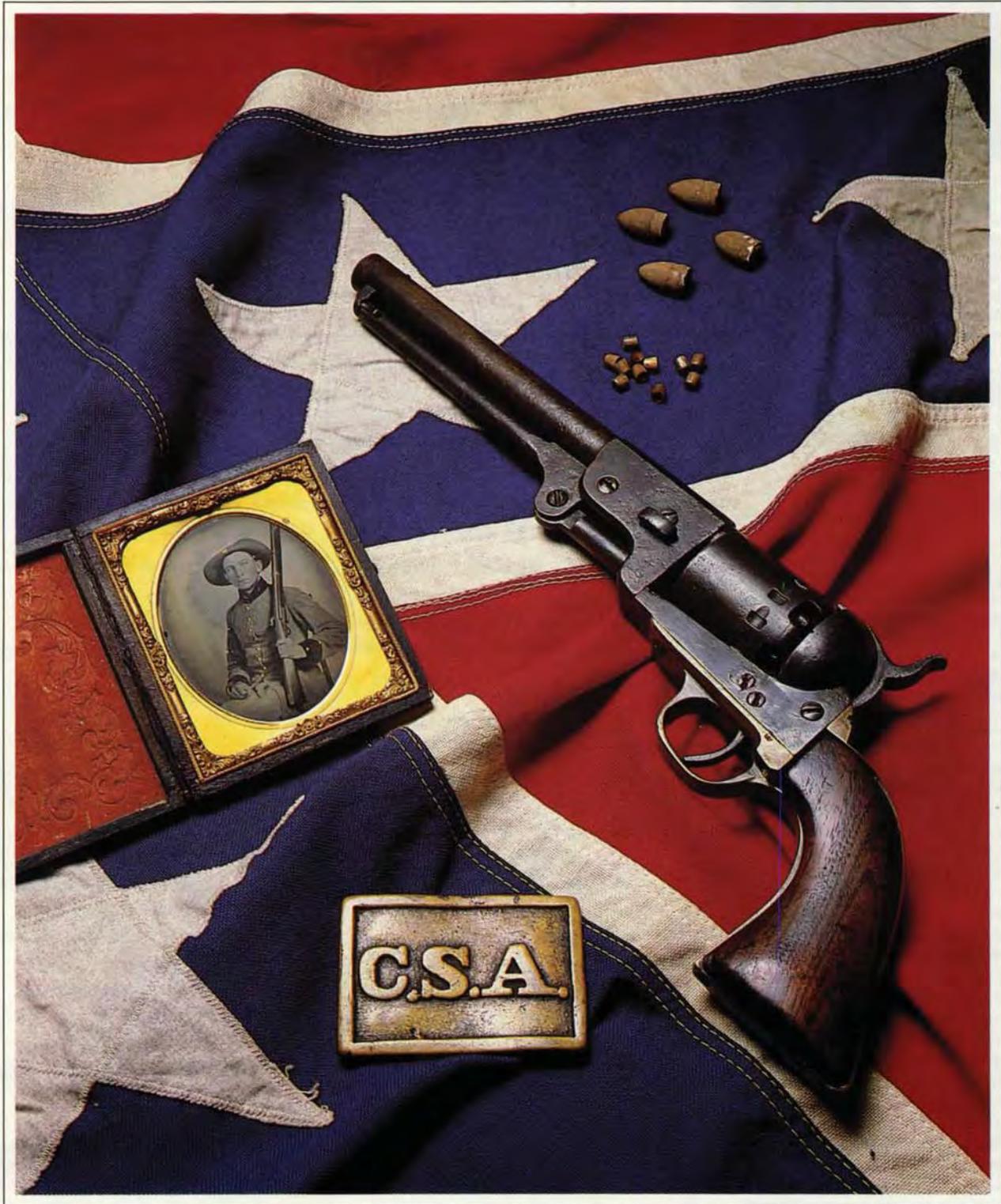
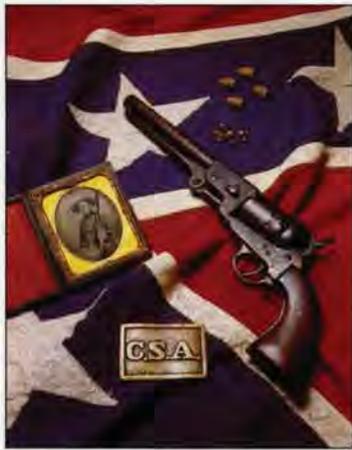


Alabama

HERITAGE

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY BY THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA





FRONT COVER: Ambrotype image of William J. Rozelle, Company A, Nineteenth Alabama Infantry, C.S.A., holding his Mississippi rifle, c. 1861; Rigdon, Ansley revolver, a Confederate copy of Samuel Colt's popular .36 caliber Navy-model pistol; bullets and percussion caps; Confederate belt buckle. See story page 2.

(Photo by Chip Cooper; ambrotype courtesy Hodo Strickland)



BACK COVER: Detail of Hirschfeld drawing (December 5, 1954) announcing the Broadway opening of "The Bad Seed," a play by Maxwell Anderson based on the novel of the same name by Alabama writer William March. See story page 36.

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Alabama

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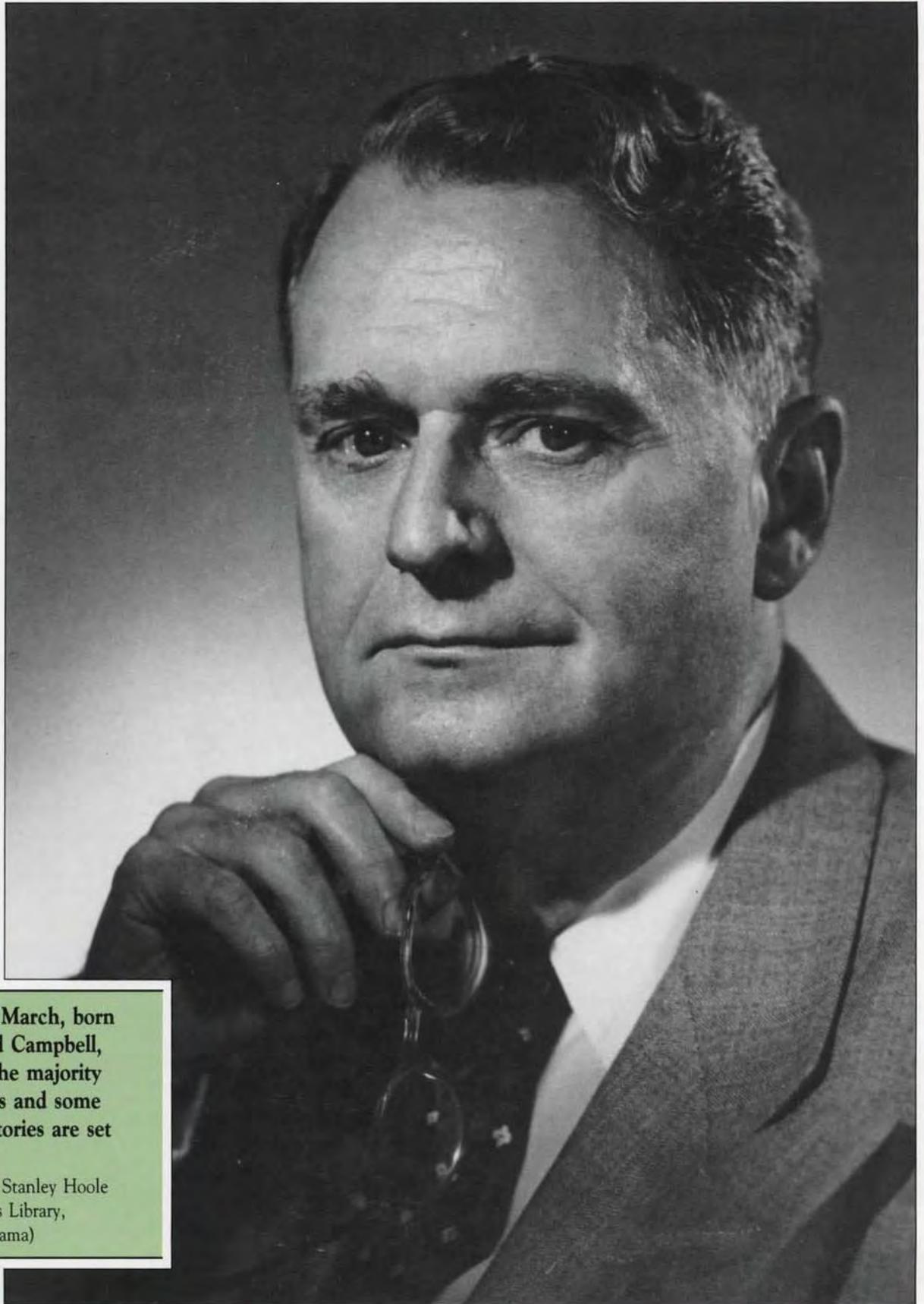
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ALABAMA'S



Writer William March, born William Edward Campbell, (1893–1954): The majority of his six novels and some seventy short stories are set in Alabama.

(Courtesy William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama)

WILLIAM MARCH

by Roy S. Simmonds

In March 1951, Alistair Cooke, the British critic and commentator on American affairs, published in the *Manchester Guardian* a long article entitled "William Faulkner: The Road to Stockholm." Cooke noted that Faulkner had just been awarded the National Book Award for fiction and had been "canonized" in 1949 by the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. While not denying the honesty, power, and "weird technical audacity" of Faulkner's writing, Cooke had little complimentary to say about the Mississippi author's work. Indeed, Cooke concluded, he dared to continue believing that the Alabama writer William March was "a whole ionosphere above Faulkner" and "still the unrecognized genius of our time." Cooke had predicted several years earlier that by 1990, when March was safely dead, his greatness would at last be recognized.

Today, of course, Faulkner's predominance as the presiding genius of twentieth-century American literature is almost universally accepted. But it is worth recalling that in the mid-1940s Faulkner was an all but forgotten writer, every one of his books effectively out of print, and that he was rescued from obscurity primarily by critic Malcolm Cowley's masterly compilation, *The Portable Faulkner*, which Cowley had culled from Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels and short stories and published in 1946. If William March is an all but forgotten writer now, thirty-three years after his death, Faulkner's experience gives us reason to hope that in the years to come March too will rise from obscurity to gain his rightful place among American fiction writers of the present century.

In the past, March has often been compared to Faulkner and not always to disadvantage. Although March wrote about the horrors of World War I, and about life in New York, in Hitler's Germany, and in England during the depression years, he also found inspiration and subject matter in his Southern roots. Like Faulkner, who created his own fictional county, Yoknapatawpha, with Jefferson as its county seat, March

Alabama-born William March, wrote Alistair Cooke, "is still the unrecognized genius of our time."

created Pearl County, Alabama, with its county seat of Athelston, and its small sawmill towns, like Williston and Hodgetown. These and other fictional locations, which March based on towns he lived in during his childhood and youth—places like Lockhart, Alabama, and Century, Florida—provide the settings for the majority of his six novels and some seventy short stories.

March's evocation of Alabama small-town life at the turn of the century is vivid and unrelenting in its observation and uncompromising in its veracity. Seeing evil and pretension for what they were, he condemned the one and ridiculed the other. To life's unfortunates, he extended an undemonstrative but heartfelt compassion, but for the intolerant, he had only seething anger and contempt. The major themes of his Alabama stories reappear in story after story: the harshness of rural life, the strict demarcations that segregate social classes in the South, the cruelties perpetrated by human beings against

their own kind, and the beauty of the landscapes which man has not yet had the opportunity to spoil.

March's prose is quiet, pithy, and deceptively powerful. A master of those two most potent literary devices, satire and irony, he employed them at times with savage exactitude, and at other times, so subtly that it is not until the reader has laid aside the book that the full import of what March has been saying sinks home. His taut writing style lent itself particularly well to the short story, a genre at which he unquestionably excelled [see the short story "Whistles," pp. 48-51]. All but one of his six novels, in fact, demonstrate his affinity for the short story form: three are essentially a series of stories or vignettes connected by a single narrative thread, two were conceived originally as short stories and later expanded, and only one, it appears, was conceived as a whole. Although March's short stories, like his novels, are read by few people today, they received widespread critical acclaim when they first appeared, and March came to be regarded by many of his contemporaries as a master of that exacting art and one of the leading practitioners of his generation.

March's prose is quiet, pithy, and deceptively powerful.

William Edward Campbell, who would later take the pen name William March, was born on September 18, 1893, in Mobile, in a house that once stood on the northwest corner of the intersection of Broad and Conti streets. He was the second in a family of eleven children, two of whom were to die in infancy. His mother, Susan March, came from a respected Mobile family, and it was thought by many that she had married beneath her station when, in 1889, she became the wife of John Leonard Campbell, the so-called "captain" of a scow which operated in Mobile Bay. William was the first son of their union, a daughter, Margaret, having been born two years earlier.

Eventually, John Campbell gave up the seafaring life and moved his family to west Florida, where he became a timber cruiser, employed by lumber companies to estimate the footage in various stands of timber. Because the job necessitated considerable travel, every now and then the family had to pull up stakes and move to a new home, more often than not to a primitive, newly established site in the arboreal wilderness. By 1907, the Campbells had returned to Alabama and had established some sort of semipermanent home in the little sawmill town of Lockhart on the southern edge of the state, just over the border from Florida.

The years of William's childhood, adolescence, and early manhood thus coincided with the period of Alabama's first sustained development, the era during which speculators, starting in the 1880s, began to exploit the rich natural resources of the land on a progressively effective and sometimes ruthless scale. What William saw and heard in those years later provided him with the raw materials for his Alabama stories.

Although the family was poor and there was apparently some measure of conflict between William and his father, William's childhood, from all accounts, was a happy one. Even in those early days, he had an interest in writing—at the age of twelve he produced a 10,000-line poem—but his main interests were singing and theatricals. Often he would entertain his siblings by acting out stories, clearly obtaining great satisfaction from the responses he elicited from his captivated audience.

He was never to lose this penchant for acting, and in later years he took part in amateur productions in Mobile and Memphis. Long after his writing career had been established, he would regale his hosts and fellow guests at dinner parties with the detailed plots of projected stories and novels, using the reactions of his listeners to measure the effectiveness of each story before he committed it to paper. Frequently, he presented the stories as factual, and such was the persuasive manner of the telling that his bemused listeners often believed that what they were hearing was the gospel truth.

The family's move back to Alabama in 1907 had one dismaying drawback so far as the fourteen-year-old William was concerned. The school in Lockhart did not progress beyond the "intermediate department" he had already passed through in Florida. William's sister Margaret was by now pursuing a high school course in Pensacola, and John and Susan Campbell evidently could not afford a similar education for their eldest son. With high school no longer an option, William was encouraged to contribute to the family income, and the only suitable job open to him in Lockhart was as a filing clerk in the office of the Jackson Lumber Company.

It soon became clear that menial employment in the confined community of a small sawmill town would never

The Jackson Lumber Company office, Lockhart, Alabama, where March worked as a filing clerk from 1907 to 1909.

(Courtesy William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama)



Office, Jackson Lumber Co., Lockhart, Ala.

satisfy the ambitious young William. At the age of sixteen, he escaped to Mobile, where he became a clerk in a law office and took a course in typing and bookkeeping at a local business school. Perhaps resentful that he had not been given the same educational opportunities as his elder sister, William assiduously put aside part of his weekly salary until, by 1913, he had accumulated sufficient savings to fund himself through a high school course of study at Valparaiso University in Indiana. On the strength of the diploma he acquired there, he entered the University of Alabama law school as a special student in the fall of 1914. When he ran out of money the following year, William returned to the Mobile law firm, where he worked for a year before deciding to seek his fortune in New York.

Campbell arrived in the city in the fall of 1916 and obtained employment as a subpoena server. By then, war clouds were massing on the horizon, although it was not until April 1917 that the United States entered the European conflict. In July 1917, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and by February 1918, he had completed his military training and was serving in France. By the time armistice was declared in November of that year, he had been promoted to sergeant and had been wounded twice—once during an assault on Belleau Wood in June, and the second

During one battle, the story goes, he came face to face with a young German soldier, a desperate boy with blond hair and blue eyes.

time during bitter and bloody offensive operations near Blanc Mont. For his "extraordinary heroism near Blanc Mont" (he had endangered his life res-



The would-be author seated on the front porch of the Jackson Lumber Company, Lockhart, Alabama.

(Courtesy William Stanley Hoole Special Collections Library, University of Alabama)

cuing wounded soldiers), Campbell was awarded the Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Navy Cross.

The letters he wrote home from overseas were full of the false casualness and the bravado many soldiers assume to quiet the fears of their families, but Campbell did admit in one letter that he had witnessed sights he knew he would never be able to forget. Although in later years he was generally noncommittal concerning his exploits in battle, one story crops up several times in the reminiscences of friends and acquaintances, a story he felt impelled to tell over and over again, almost as a form of expiation. During one battle, the story goes, he came face to face with a young German soldier,

The war left him permanently embittered against the military, political, and religious establishments.

a desperate boy with blond hair and blue eyes. Instinctively, he lunged at the German with his bayonet. The boy stumbled and the bayonet pierced his throat, killing him instantly, his eyes wide open, staring into Campbell's face. Whether the story is true or not, it is certainly true that his experiences during World War I scarred Campbell mentally as well as physically, and the vision of that young German was to haunt him for the rest of his life. Later he would develop an hysterical throat condition and would feel the need on more than one occasion for psychiatric help.

The war also changed his attitude about life and left him permanently embittered against the military, political, and religious establishments. He acquired a personal philosophy, which he retained until the day he died, based on the premise that human beings are basically evil and individual human existence of little importance. His unfounded fear that his health had been irreversibly impaired by the poison gas he had passed through while at the front also became an obsession which some of his fictional characters were later to share.

from Bill
secondary,
Germany.
Feb. 11, 1919.

William wrote to his family during World War I, telling them he had witnessed sights during the war he knew he would never be able to forget. He also sent home this photograph of himself taken in Germany, February 11, 1919.

(Courtesy William Stanley Hoole
Special Collections Library,
University of Alabama)



In August 1919, when his marine company was disbanded, Campbell, now twenty-five, returned to Mobile, where he became the personal secretary of John B. Waterman, president of the newly founded Waterman Steamship Corporation. His progress up the company hierarchy was spectacular. In 1924, he was promoted to traffic manager; in 1926, he set up a branch office in Memphis; and in 1928, he returned to New York to establish a Waterman office on Broadway. During these years, he developed an avid if not a morbid interest in psychological theories, reading book after book on the subject and maintaining that the insights they provided helped him greatly in his negotiations with customers and competitors.

At this time, too, he began his adult literary career. Writing both for his own amusement and as a form of escape from the cares of the business world, he completed a dozen or so stories, sending them out under various pseudonyms, determining that the pen name on the first story accepted would be the one he would adopt permanently. Thus, William March the author was born when the editors of the New York magazine *Forum* accepted his story, "The Holly Wreath," and published it in the October 1929 issue. An account of the ambushing of a patrol of three American World War I soldiers (one of whom survives to tell the tale), the story is rendered more powerful by the almost matter-of-fact tone in which the greater part of it is narrated. This technique—the recounting of terrible happenings in measured and unsensational prose—became a distinctive March trademark.

Following publication of "The Holly Wreath," a steady stream of March's stories began to appear in several "little magazines" of the day. Some stories were based on his childhood memories

of life in rural Alabama, and some on his war experiences in France. A number of collections of vignettes—"Fifteen from Company K," "Nine Prisoners," "Sixteen and the Unknown Soldier," and "Two Soldiers"—were linked, in that they recorded the lives and deaths of the soldiers in a marine

The recounting of terrible happenings in measured and unsensational prose became a distinctive March trademark.

company like the one in which March himself had served. One of these stories, "Nine Prisoners," the account of the arbitrary shooting of a group of unarmed German prisoners on the orders of the company's commanding officer, created something of a furor when it was published in the November 1931 issue of *Forum*. One infuriated reader completely missed March's intention—to show that men are prisoners of their own actions—and accused the author of having "murdered the good name and good sense of millions of American soldiers."

"Nine Prisoners," together with the other published collections, plus two short stories and sixty-eight vignettes—some previously unpublished—formed the basis of March's first full-length work, *Company K*, published in January 1933. The book, which was to become the most frequently reprinted of all March's work, consists of 113 sections of varying lengths, each related in the first person by a different member of the fictitious marine company. Hailed by the majority of contemporary reviewers as one of the most powerful antiwar novels of all time, and favorably compared with Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and John Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers*, *Company K*

has come to be regarded as one of the classic novels of World War I.

By the time the book came out, March was living in Hamburg, Germany. He had been made a vice president of Waterman in 1931, and at the end of 1932 had been sent to Europe, entrusted with the task of developing markets there and of opening company offices in Berlin, Hamburg, and London. He was not enthusiastic about the assignment. Always troubled by the dichotomy between his business and literary careers, he had difficulty determining where his true interests lay. He had been loathe to leave behind the literary life he had enjoyed in New York, but he also needed an income. His father had died some years before, and, as the eldest son, March felt an obligation to provide whatever financial support his mother and her other children needed. Without his salary from Waterman, he could not have been in a position to help, for he made little money from his writing.

***Company K* was hailed by reviewers as one of the most powerful antiwar novels of all time.**

March detested life in Germany, where he could not escape the sort of business socializing he so disliked. Moreover, Hitler had just come to power, and it was clear to March that the German people, drunk on a wave of nationalism, were voluntarily surrendering the very thing they should treasure most: their freedom, especially their freedom of speech. Deeply troubled by the political situation, distressed because his mail was being scrutinized by a censor, and unsure of the direction of his own life, March consulted a psychoanalyst in Germany. Perhaps because writing had by now become a kind of therapy for him, he also expressed his distaste for the Nazis in a powerful short story, "Personal Letter." In the story, the narrator (an American businessman very much like March) accompanies a German business associate to a beer cellar, where the American is harangued by a

stormtrooper who tells him that he should respect the country's mother tongue while in Germany and speak German only. Because the story was provocative, and its publication might have endangered the friends and business associates he would have to leave behind when his work in Germany was completed, March refused to release the story for publication, and it did not appear in print until 1945.

By 1947, he had encountered a writer's block of monumental proportions.

By mid-1934, he was in London, still working for Waterman. His second novel, *Come in at the Door*, which he had completed in Germany, had been published earlier that year. A story set in rural Alabama and having miscegenation as one of its themes, it was the first of a projected cycle of novels (which March did not complete), all of which were to involve the same cast of characters, with each book told from a different point of view. *Come in at the Door* received a mixed and rather puzzled reaction from the critics, although one reviewer noted that the Pulitzer Prize had been awarded to lesser novels, and others compared it favorably to the work of William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, and Sherwood Anderson.

March's first collection of short stories, *The Little Wife and Other Stories*, many of them set in Reedyville, Alabama, was published in 1935 to the accompaniment of approving notices. Some reviewers, however, disliked the theme of futility that pervades the stories and the almost total absence of "comic relief." Despite these objections, reviewers again compared March to Faulkner and Anderson, as well as

to A. E. Coppard and James Stephens. Elizabeth Hart, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, placed the matter into proper perspective: "Yes," she admitted, "this book is disquieting and painful. It is also a necessity for any one who makes the slightest pretense to believing in the short story as an art."

The next year, while still living in London, March published his third novel, *The Tallons*. He dedicated the volume to the Scottish psychiatrist Edward Glover, with whom he had taken a course of analysis earlier that year and who had cured him of the hysterical throat condition that had manifested itself shortly after his arrival in London. A story of passionate love, jealousy, paranoia, and fratricide, *The Tallons* is set in Hodgetown, Alabama. Its story line is the essence of simplicity; indeed, it is nothing more nor less than the age-old legend of the eternal triangle: The good, simple man (Andrew) courts and is brutally rejected by the shallow, flighty girl (Myrtle) who desires the feckless, conceited brother (Jim). A murder ensues.

Published in London under the title *A Song for Harps*, the book received a more enthusiastic reception from British than from American reviewers, a fact which March was quick to note and never to forget. If the American reviewers as a whole did not like the book, many of them thought that it showed artistic improvement on *Come in at the Door* and suggested that March was potentially a writer of the first order. March himself thought kindly of *The Tallons* to the end of his life, because, a friend recounts, "it had permitted him to talk at 'arm's length' of his peers, his family, and of the insipid quality of living a casually stupid life." He did not hide his disappointment at the reaction of the critics, considering the book "head and shoulders over everything I've done."

During the years he lived in London, March finally determined the direction in which he would steer the remainder of his life. As soon as he had accumulated sufficient capital to provide a comfortable living for himself and his relatives, he would burn his boats so far as the business world was concerned and devote his time wholly to his literary career. In fact, his acquisition of valuable Waterman Steamship Company stock over the years had already made him a wealthy man, and he was able to resign from the company shortly after being recalled home in 1937.

Settling again in New York, March was able to resume the social and literary life he had been obliged to abandon nearly five years earlier. Short stories and fables poured from his pen. *Some Like Them Short*, his second collection of short stories, was published in 1939. Written over a period of several years, these stories explore, among other topics, the mores of small-town life and the manner in which reality and illusion can become interchangeable, sometimes seeming inseparable. Unrelenting in its honesty, concentrating on psychological rather than narrative plots, the volume evoked a diverse reception from reviewers, some of whom objected to March's oppressive philosophy and to the unrelieved gloom of his stories. Generally, however, the critical response was approving. In the view of Charles Poore of the *New York Times*, the volume reaffirmed March's right to be regarded as "one of the most accomplished of contemporary short-story writers." N. L. Rothman, in the *Saturday Review*, wrote: "Every one of the stories is alive with active artistic intelligence. They suggest in sum that March's next novel will be something to look out for."

And so it proved to be. *The Looking-Glass*, published in 1943, is March's longest and most ambitious novel and his finest literary achievement. Despite its complex structure, it is the best integrated, both narratively and thematically, of all his full-length works. A study of narcissism set in the fictional town of Reedyville, Alabama, the novel tells the story (through a narrator, March's alter ego) of each member of the community, their individual histories interwoven in such a subtle fashion that each story is totally dependent upon the others. The book received a number of rave reviews: Alistair Cooke called it "an exquisite work" and March "the most underrated of American writers, living or dead"; some reviewers compared it with Henry Bellamann's recently published best-seller *Kings Row* and with Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*; there were also the inevitable comparisons with Faulkner, Caldwell, and Anderson, as well as with Carson McCullers and Thomas Wolfe. Other critics, however, disliked its fractured chronological structure and the Freudian hang-ups of most of its characters. The novel was not successful in bookstores.

During the war years, March lived in a luxury apartment on the thirty-second floor of the Century Towers, overlooking the East River on one side and Central Park on the other. Here he alternated between a hectic social life and periods of near hermitlike existence. His cocktail parties became legendary. He acquired an interest in and a flair for graphology. Carefully designing his life so as to provide himself with an increasing fund of psychological knowledge as grist for his writer's mill, March used binoculars to watch the unsuspecting humanity far below his apartment in Central Park. His huge cocktail parties became merely a front for his observa-

tion of people with their defenses down. Making sure his guests were liberally supplied with drink, he would sit back and listen to their uninhibited talk. Sometimes, when he became bored with the company, he would simply walk out on his guests and leave them to it.

The walls of his Mobile apartment were adorned with paintings by Picasso, Modigliani, Rouault, Braque, Vlaminck, Utrillo, and Soutine.

In 1944 he moved to a smaller apartment in Gramercy Park. By then his literary output had begun to slow down, and by 1946, it came virtually to a stop. He worked desultorily on a novel he had been planning since before the war but was unable to make much progress. In 1945 he brought out another book, *Trial Balance*, but this was essentially a retrospective collection of the fifty-five short stories he wished to preserve. Only seven of the stories had not been published before, including "Personal Letter," the story he had written in the early 1930s attacking Hitler's Germany.

TWO FABLES BY WILLIAM MARCH

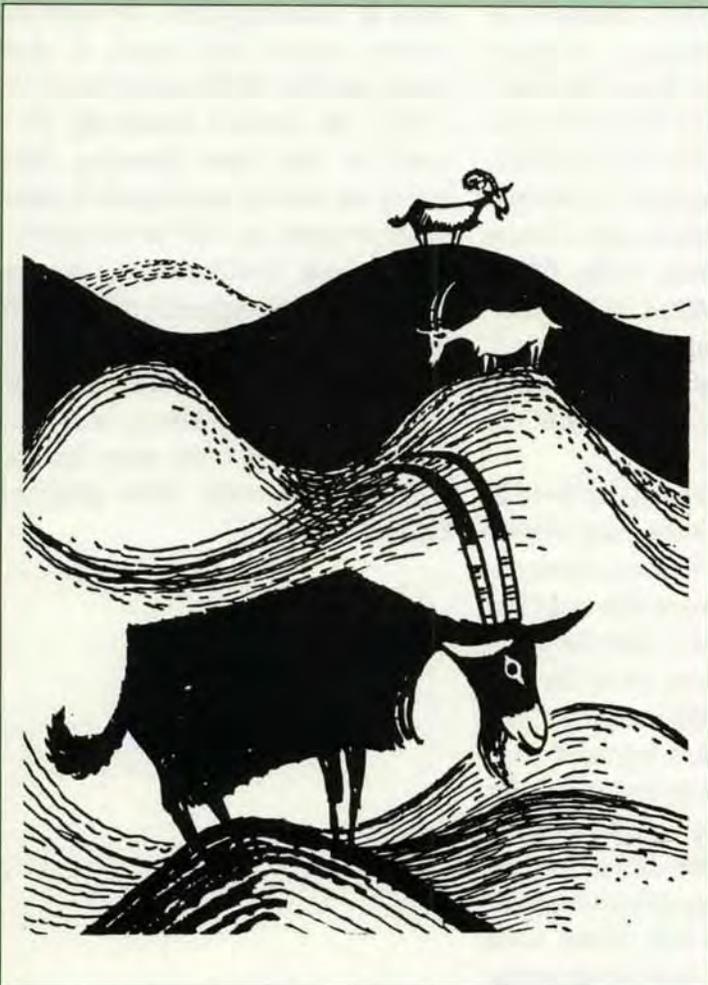
William March found the classic fabular form a satisfying one in which to express his ideas and his philosophy of life, for it is a genre to which his astringent brand of humor was admirably suited. Here he was able to explore in a more concise, though a no less efficient manner, the themes that had preoccupied him in his novels and short stories. Although many of his fables appeared in various New York newspapers and in "little magazines" across the country, he was never able to persuade any publisher to issue the collected fables, and they did not appear in book form until six years after his death. The two fables which follow, published in March's 99 Fables, edited by William T. Going, are reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates, New York, and the William (March) Campbell Trust, copyright 1960 by the Merchants National Bank of Mobile as Trustee; artwork by Richard Brough, reprinted by permission of The University of Alabama Press, copyright 1960 by The University of Alabama Press.

The World and Its Redeemers

For years the mountain goats had lived in comfort, each generation finding itself better off than its predecessor. In time they might have achieved contentment, but when things seemed most stable with them, a redeemer appeared, saying it was the destiny of mountain goats to convert and enlighten the world. The goats, aroused by the zeal of the prophet, started a war against their neighbors, but to their amazement these neighbors neither knew they were lost nor desired to be saved, and resisted with all their strength, and the final result, after years of destruction, was that both sides were almost annihilated.

In the end, the mountain goats were driven back to their own country, but things had gone to ruin during their absence. The paths they had made were forgotten, their dwellings had fallen down, and the fields where they had grazed were covered with nettles; in fact, the goats who had managed to survive found themselves once more in the darkness, the poverty, and the despair from which their ancestors had so patiently emerged.

The world could have been saved long ago if it had not been for its redeemers.





The Unspeakable Words

There were words in the Brett language considered so corrupting in their effect on others that if anyone wrote them or was heard to speak them aloud, he was fined and thrown into prison. The King of the Bretts was of the opinion that the words were of no importance one way or the other, and besides, everybody in the country knew them anyway; but his advisers disagreed, and at last, to determine who was right, a committee was appointed to examine the people separately.

At length everyone in the kingdom had been examined, and found to know the words quite well, without the slightest damage to themselves. There was then left only one little girl, a five-year-old who lived in the mountains with her deaf and dumb parents. The committee hoped that this little girl, at least, had never heard the corrupting words, and on the morning they visited her, they said solemnly: "Do you know the meaning of *poost*, *gist*, *duss*, and *feng*?"

The little girl admitted that she did not, and then, smiling happily, she said, "Oh, you must mean *feek*, *kusk*, *dal*, and *liben*!"

Those who don't know the words must make them up for themselves.

By 1947, having quite clearly encountered a writer's block of monumental proportions, March had dropped out of circulation altogether, isolating himself in his apartment. Denied his main purpose in life—his writing—and consumed by his belief in the insignificance of human existence, he drifted into a state of deep depression. His friends in New York, realizing that something was seriously wrong, contacted March's Waterman colleagues in Mobile, two of whom journeyed to New York, where they found him in a state of extreme mental and physical distress and his apartment in an appalling condition. They took him back to Alabama, to the Waterman-owned Grand Hotel at Point Clear on Mobile Bay. Here, he made a slow recovery and, after a time, began once more to take an interest in life.

Eventually, March rented an apartment in Mobile, from which he made periodic visits to New York. On one trip, he met the art dealer Klaus Perls, and the two men became friends. Under Perls' influence, March's interest in modern art blossomed, and he became an enthusiastic collector. Soon the walls of his Mobile apartment were adorned with a number of fine modern French paintings by, among others, Picasso, Modigliani, Rouault, Braque, Vlaminck, Utrillo, and Bombois. But above all, he was fascinated by the outward violence and inner torment inherent in the paintings of Chaim Soutine, whose work seemed to reflect March's own preoccupation with the mindless violence of contemporary life.

Art-collecting proved to be excellent therapy, and as his recovery continued, March began spending more time away from Mobile on visits to New York and New Orleans. By 1950 he had moved permanently to the French Quarter, where he felt more at home. There he lived a quiet and ordered life,

cultivating a few carefully selected friendships with local writers and artists. Although he had opted for a more Bohemian life, he was unable to abandon his strictly observed conventional mode of attire and his businessman's caution where financial matters were concerned. While not easily parted from his money, March was frequently generous, often anonymously, with any writer or artist in the Quarter who he heard was down on his luck. In such a comparatively contented frame of mind, his creative powers were reactivated. He worked at his writing during the day and met nightly with a small circle of friends in a local bar, where he re-established his old practice of telling stories and weighing their effect upon his listeners.

A new novel, *October Island*, based on a short story of the same name which

The Bad Seed is a riveting thriller as well as a summation of March's personal philosophy.

had appeared in 1946 in *Good Housekeeping*, was published in 1952. With ironic humor, it relates the adventures of two missionaries, husband and wife, who, while on an imaginary South Seas island, ostensibly to convert the natives to Christianity, are influenced by the pagan gods they had come to denounce. Although regarded by many as a lightweight piece, *October Island* is, in many ways, March's most personally revealing work, for here he explores the dichotomy in his own life: the civilized versus the native, the staid-businessman personality, which he never entirely shrugged off, versus the Bohemian-writer personality, which he gladly embraced.

In 1953 March purchased a beautiful old Creole cottage on Dumaine Street in New Orleans. It was the first home he had ever owned, and it was here that he put the finishing touches on what would be his last book, the novel that he had been planning since before the war and which he had attempted unsuccessfully to write in New York. This was *The Bad Seed*, which takes place in a city reminiscent of Mobile. It is the story of eight-year-old child monster Rhoda Penmark, who murders three people, two of them purely to gain possessions which she covets, and the third to protect her own skin. In addition to being a riveting thriller, the book is also a summation of March's philosophy—that human beings are basically evil—and a powerful tract on the violence of our modern age, a subject with which he had by now become deeply obsessed.

Unlike his other novels, *The Bad Seed* seems to have been conceived originally as a full-length novel, but we cannot be certain of that fact. March destroyed almost all his unpublished work and, with one exception, all his working notes, making the genesis of much of his work difficult to trace. Whatever its

With this Hirschfeld drawing, the *New York Times*, on Sunday, December 5, 1954, announced the Broadway opening of "The Bad Seed," a play by Maxwell Anderson based on the novel of the same name by William March. March, who had died some six months earlier, was never to know of the play's success.

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origins, *The Bad Seed* was the first best seller March was ever to have. Ironically, he was never to know the full extent of its success, for just over a month after the book was published, he suffered a fatal heart attack at home in his sleep. The date was May 15, 1954. He was sixty years old.

Several months later, Maxwell Anderson successfully adapted *The Bad Seed* as a Broadway play, and a film version appeared two years later. Also in 1954, a retrospective and representative collection of March's works, edited by scholar William T. Going, was published under the title *A William March Omnibus*. The only completed full-length manuscript March left at his death, *99 Fables* [see p. 44], was published posthumously in 1960.



Thirty-three years have passed since March's death, and during those years his work has been all but forgotten, his name kept alive only by the efforts of a small band of cognoscenti. Brief discussions of March's work have appeared from time to time in critical volumes, mainly those dealing with the literature of war, and a few of his short stories, always presented as brilliant examples of the genre, have been reprinted in teaching anthologies. But so far as the reading public is concerned, March's work remains largely unknown. The only two of his books now in print anywhere in the English-speaking world are his first and his last, *Company K* and *The Bad Seed*, and those only in paperback editions.

Within the past year, however, the situation has begun to change. On February 28, 1986, the mayor of Mobile, Arthur R. Outlaw, signed a proclamation calling on all Mobilians to recognize the achievements of the late William E. Campbell, whose literary output under the name of William March "placed him in the first ranks of the writers of his time." Mayor Outlaw announced that Auburn University's Center for the Arts and Humanities would honor the author with a "Salute to William March in Mobile" the next month, and he designated March 3-8, 1986, as "Mobile Salutes William March Week." This year, further acclaim may come March's way. The University of Alabama Press is preparing to bring out a paperback edition of March's short story collec-

tion, *Trial Balance*, which contains some of the author's finest work.

Now that 1990 is within our sights, perhaps Alistair Cooke's prediction will be realized, and the long-delayed, unqualified recognition of March will come about. Whatever the verdict of posterity may be, there is no denying that March's legacy to the world—his still-living work—will remain a rich and revealing chapter in the literary history of Alabama.



Whistles

A short story by William March

Like the majority of March's short stories and novels, "Whistles" is set in Alabama. The fictional location for the story is the small sawmill community of Hodgetown, which March based on the town of Lockhart, Alabama, where he spent a good portion of his youth. Hodgetown is also the setting for two of his novels, Come in at the Door and The Tallons. "Whistles" is reprinted here by permission of Harold Ober Associates, New York, and the William (March) Campbell Trust; copyright 1945 by William March and renewed in 1972 by the Merchants National Bank of Mobile as Administrator.

The other night Mr. Ridley saw a play in which a whistle offstage was the principal actor. The scene was a small factory town, and each time anything happened to a character, the whistle blew steadily, muted at first, but getting louder as the disaster it announced became more and more apparent. The play and the blowing of the whistles stirred old memories which his mind at first could not recall, but as he walked slowly home, with the crowds of Times Square jostling him, the past came back with such vividness that it was almost as if that one phase of his life was not remembered at all, but re-created and existing beside his life of the present.

He was twelve years old again, and again he lived in Hodgetown, Alabama. He saw the old place in all its details—the way the town was laid out, the yellow, frame houses of the workmen, the company office, and the sawmill itself, with men hurrying home from work, their shoulders covered with sawdust. He saw faces and repeated names which he had not remembered for years, but mostly he thought of old Mrs. Foley and the things she told him about whistles.

She was past sixty when he first had met her, and as he turned east on 42nd Street, he remembered why she had gone to Hodgetown in the first place.

The mill superintendent had had a good deal of trouble with the running of the company boarding-house. It was a two-story frame building which housed the workmen who had no families of their own, and the superintendent hadn't found anyone who could run it satisfactorily. Then he got a letter from Mrs. Foley. She said she'd heard about the trouble with the boarding-house, and she thought she could take hold and run it right. She was a widow, she explained, and her children had grown up and married. She had two

grandchildren she was raising, but she found time hanging heavy on her hands. She'd never run a boarding-house before, but she'd lived in sawmill towns since she was born, and she was sure she could make out. In desperation, the superintendent wrote her to come down and take charge.

Everybody in Hodgetown had wondered what Mrs. Foley would be like. They expected a big, rawboned woman with a hard face and an undershot jaw, but she was nothing like that. Instead, she was somewhat dried up and timid. Her sandy, grayish hair was thinning now, and on top of her head there was a bald spot about the size of a silver dollar. She got off the local one afternoon in April with her grandchildren—a boy of fifteen and a girl of twelve. The boy was named Fletch and about five years before he had had an accident while playing with some dynamite caps which he had found. There was nothing left of his right hand now except a thumb, which seemed, standing alone, twice the length a thumb should be. The girl was more like her grandmother, or what her grandmother had been. She was plump and sandy-haired, and she laughed at everything you said to her, no matter what it was.

When Mrs. Foley had got her baggage and her family safely off the train, she said, first thing, that the boarding-house would have to be scrubbed. She asked the superintendent to send her two strong men from the mill next morning, and he promised. Then she went off to take official possession.

The workmen came next morning at six, and Mrs. Foley started at once to dismantle the rooms. She went about with her head tied in a towel, a can of kerosene in her hand, supervising the workmen, and when the men had finished the heavy work in each room, she scrubbed the floors and walls and even the ceilings with lye soap and hot water.

Mr. Ridley's family had lived across the street, only a few

doors away, and Mr. Ridley himself, who was a young boy in those days, had gone over to watch.

When Mrs. Foley saw him standing there, she turned and spoke ingratiatingly, "What's your name, little boy?"

"Donald Ridley."

"Oh, so you're the doctor's little boy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, Donald," she said after a moment, "why don't you take your good clothes off and work, too? You can help Fletch and Ada scour baseboards." She handed him a brush. "I got to run down and see about dinner pretty soon," she said. "The big whistle's due to blow in an hour and thirty-five minutes."

That was how he got to know Fletch, and Fletch told him that morning about his accident with the dynamite, while Ada scrubbed on her hands and knees, looking up at them, and laughing at each pause in the story as if she had never heard it before and considered it enormously amusing.

After a while Mrs. Foley came back to see how things were going. "We'll leave the heavy work for the men," she said. "All we'll do is to sort of clean up behind them. We ought to be about half through at supper-time, and before the big whistle blows tomorrow night, I bet there won't be a speck of dirt on these here premises."

For a minute or so there was only the sound of the four brushes against the woodwork, and then Mrs. Foley spoke again. "I'm going to give all three of you children a genuine pretty for helping out so good. See if I don't."

The first whistle, awakening the town, came at five o'clock in the morning. In the winter-time it was completely dark then. Sometimes when his father was returning from a sick call, Donald would wake up before the first whistle went. If there was a light in Mrs. Foley's window, he did not have to look at the clock, but would get up and dress, for he knew that soon the big whistle on the sawmill would sound, and that with its first booming, steamboatlike blast she would be knocking on the lodgers' doors and seeing that they did not go back to sleep.

Then, exactly at 5:15, she would have breakfast on the tables. At ten minutes to six she would start the men off on their way to work. Sometimes she'd start a man a little earlier. "You better leave five minutes before the rest, Mr. Maybridge," she'd say, "because you'll never get there by six if you don't. You know how slow you are." Or: "You boys quit joking Charlie Gorman about how much he eats. He may take a long time at table and leave the house later than you do, but he'll be down at the stackers working before the rest of you get as far as the lath mill."

Then, when she was alone with the littered breakfast tables, she'd roll up her sleeves and go to work. Later she'd

leave Ada in charge and go shopping for food. Sometimes she'd go to the neighboring farms in search of fresh vegetables, but at ten o'clock, no matter where she was or what she had to attend to, she'd turn and say: "I've got to get my dinner started now. The big whistle is going to blow in two hours, or nearabout."

She ran the boarding-house for five years, and things went smoothly under her management. Then she took sick. Mr. Ridley remembered the day well. He was almost a member of the Foley establishment by that time, he was over there so much. His father had gone to see her professionally, and when he came home he told Donald that what Mrs. Foley had been having for the past months were heart attacks, and that she'd have to take things easy.

Donald went to the boarding-house and sat by Mrs. Foley's bed. "Well, I never heard such foolishness," she said. "Your father says I got to stay in bed for a month at least. It's easy enough for him to say stay in bed, but who's going to run things with me in bed, I'd like to know? Why, it must be almost time for the twelve-o'clock whistle now, and I got to get up." She raised herself on one elbow and looked at Donald for advice. "You're a smart boy, Donnie," she said. "You got lots of booksense. What do you think?"

"I think you ought to do what my father says."

She lay back again, only half convinced. "Ada is a good manager," she said doubtfully. "It's true Ada can manage almost as well as I can, but there's a lot of things she don't know about yet. I'm having smothered steak today, and there's tomato gravy with it. Well, sir, that would be all right except George Patmore can't eat tomatoes in no shape or form. They upset his stomach so bad that he ain't a bit of good for two or three days afterwards."

Mr. Ridley said: "You just rest. I'll tell Mr. Patmore not to eat any of the tomato gravy."

"Oh, George Patmore will eat the tomato gravy," she said. "You may be sure of that. Nothing you or anybody else could say would stop him. George'll eat anything that's passed him, whether it makes him sick or not. Now, if I was just up and about, I'd fix some special gravy that *looked* like the other but didn't have tomatoes in it, and then he'd never know he'd missed anything. That's the way I worked it last Wednesday."

She broke off suddenly. "Well, now, I *know* I got to get up!" she said. "Joe Yates has got to shave this noontime sure, and that's all there is to it. I just remembered that this is a Wednesday, too, and it's the night Joe's girl over on Calumet Street comes to eat supper with him. He won't shave unless you make him, and his girl told me the other day that if he didn't take to shaving more regular, she was going to up and quit him." She sat up in bed again. "I got

to get up, because Joe won't shave unless somebody like me stands over him the whole time and coaxes him."

She threw back the bedclothing suddenly and said: "Hand me my shoes, Donnie. I'll get up for a little while and start things to running smoothly."

She got up and tried to walk across the floor, but she could not make it. Mr. Ridley helped her back into bed, and he sat beside her again. "Well, sir!" she said in surprise. "Well, sir!"

Her spell of faintness had frightened her, and she rested quietly against her pillow and closed her eyes. She was silent for a long time, but when her heart had quieted down she began to talk of her early years, as if she realized at last that her life was over and she sought to find some common denominator for her days.

"You know, Donnie," she began, "I was born in a little sawmill town. It was a place called Shearn's Mill, and the first thing I remember very good was when I was a little girl, not more than five years old, helping my mother get the menfolks off in the morning.

"They didn't have a whistle at Shearn's Mill. A watchman used to come out in the morning and beat a piece of tin to wake up the hands. Then Mamma and me would get breakfast and see that Papa and the boys ate proper and washed theirselves good."

She talked slowly, recalling each detail of her past: "Papa was a restless man and kept moving us about from one place to another. I'll bet there's not a sawmill town in this part of the state that we didn't live in at one time or another. Things went on like that until I married.

"My husband was a millwright, and we started housekeeping in a place called Ivy Pond. It was a sawmill town, too, and the only difference to me was I had only one man to cook for instead of a passel. I remember Ivy Pond so good because they had a deep-pitched whistle that used to get stuck about twice a week, and when it did it just kept blowing away until some of the men climbed on top of the mill and fixed it.

"Then after we left Ivy Pond, we went to a place called Motley. The whistle at Motley had a sharp, sour tone, and it nearabout put my teeth on edge to listen to it. I never could abide the whistle at Motley, but then they didn't have many whistles in those days that sounded as fine as the ones we got right here in Hodgetown."

She lay back, caressing the bald spot on her crown. "You know, Donnie, I never thought much about it before, but when I look back, the thing I remember best about places I lived in is the kind of whistle there was on top of the mill."

A moment later the Hodgetown planer sounded its blast, and then the lathmill whistle and the whistle atop the

sawmill went together.

Mrs. Foley said, "I spent my life answering whistles, but this is one time I can't do it."

Mr. Ridley told her: "You'll be up again in a few days. Don't worry about it."

"I don't know about that, Donnie," she said. She laughed triumphantly, holding her sides. "But I'll bet when I die and they lay me to rest, Gabriel's trumpet will turn out to be just another sawmill whistle," she said proudly. She nodded her head a couple of times and added: "That's just the way it's going to be, and I want to serve notice right here and now that if it is, I'm not a-going to get up out of my grave."

Ada came in to see if her grandmother wanted anything. She'd be in again as soon as she got the men fed and back to work, she said, but right at the moment she was busy fixing some special gravy for Mr. George Patmore, one without tomatoes.

Then Mrs. Foley laughed in spite of the pain it caused her, and pressed her hand against her heart. "Well, I never!" she said. "Well, I never, for a fact!"

In those days Mr. Ridley was reading a great deal, and he was pondering for the first time the great issues of existence. What Mrs. Foley told him about her life, and the forces which had regulated it, made a deep impression on him. With his new knowledge, his new insight, he thought of her as a pitiful, ignorant old woman whose life had been spent in senseless bondage to whistles.

He hinted at these things one afternoon, but she looked at him in complete amazement. "Now, whoever put such ideas in your head?" she asked. "Why, I'd say offhand that I had a full, happy life." She became more serious. "I worked hard doing what I wanted to do, and I know now that I really accomplished something. I married and raised a big family that turned out as well as average. Now, what else could I have been?" She rubbed the bald spot on her head thoughtfully and then went on: "I'm thinking that you're the one who's mixed up about things, Donnie—not me."

Mr. Ridley went to see her almost every afternoon during her sickness, and she told him much of her early life, but the more she said, the more she affirmed her contentment with her lot, the deeper his sense of her personal tragedy became, until, at length, she was the fixed symbol in his mind of all injustice.

He had tried once or twice to explain her plight to her, choosing his words as delicately as he knew how; to show her how sad and how wasted her life had been.

"What are you going to do with your life, Donnie?" she asked mildly.

"I don't know," he said. "That is, I don't know definitely yet; but there's so much oppression and injustice in the world, and I want to do something about it."

"Why don't you be a doctor like your father?" she asked. "There's a good way to help people, if that's what you want to do."

"I don't know," he said. "That's all right in its way, but it's too small. I want to do bigger things than that."

She smiled suddenly with amusement and made a clucking sound with her lips. "You don't want to do anything for the good of people," she said. "You just want to sit around and talk about it."

But seeing the hurt, serious expression on his face, she reached out and touched his hand. "I know you're well up in your books," she said, "but you haven't got much common sense for a boy going on seventeen, have you, Donnie?"

She died a few weeks later, and they arranged to bury her in the Hodgetown cemetery. Mr. Ridley, walking home that night after he had seen the play with the whistle offstage, recalled the funeral of twenty years ago in all its details.

The funeral had been on a Sunday afternoon, with the mill shut down and the men not working, so almost everybody in town had gone. There had been a hearse and a few carriages for the family. The rest of Hodgetown had walked to the graveyard. The funeral had formed at the boarding-house and had passed down Hiawatha Street, the full length of the town. Then, when the procession approached the railroad cut and the steps which led to the planer mill, everybody saw old Mr. Stamford standing on top of a boxcar in the cut watching the funeral come down the street.

He was an old man, about the age of Mrs. Foley. He had boarded with her until his widowed daughter came to Hodgetown to take care of him, and he and Mrs. Foley had been friends.

The old man seemed greatly affected by the death of his friend, and he took off his hat and bent his head as the hearse came nearer. He looked about him undecidedly for a moment, as if he wanted to do something for her to show his respect, to make some appropriate gesture. Then, as if suddenly knowing precisely what to do, he climbed down the side of the boxcar, ran up the steps and went into the powerhouse. A moment later the whistle on the planer began to sound—thin, insistent, wailing.

Almost at once the watchman at the lathmill, hearing the planer whistle and interpreting it correctly, began to sound the whistle there, and before the procession turned off Hiawatha Street into the road that led to the graveyard, the

big whistle on top of the sawmill went, too, with its full, booming blast.

The whistles kept blowing during the march to the cemetery, and even during the services at the graveside they could be heard, while Mr. Ridley stood there wondering how anybody could be so insensitive or so cruel as to blow whistles over a poor, dead old woman whose life had been nothing more than a long series of whistles, and who was entitled now to her rest. It seemed brutal and inhuman to him. He wanted to protest, but he realized that nobody would understand what he had to say.

The whistles still blew at intervals while the empty hearse and the carriages returned to Hodgetown. They stopped blowing in the order in which they had originally begun—the planer first, then the lathmill, and finally the big whistle on top of the sawmill.

He had thought about Mrs. Foley and her funeral for the remainder of that summer. In the fall he had gone away to school and gradually he had forgotten her. He hadn't thought of her at all in years until this particular night—the night when he heard the whistle offstage.

He went into his apartment, his mind still busy with the past, but he did not turn on his light. He sat in the dark smoking a cigarette and again the past came back to him with such vividness that the details of his early life seemed not so much remembered as experienced again in their entirety. Then, as he sat there smoking, he suddenly saw old Mrs. Foley's life in another light. He understood at last why her friend the watchman blew the whistle at her funeral and why that was the one gesture for him to have made, the one compliment. He saw her now with great clarity, and he understood, at last, that in reality she had been one of the fortunate people of the world—one of those who know why they were born and what their particular usefulness is to be.

He wondered, then, what his own usefulness was, for what unique purpose he had been created. He discovered that he did not know, that few people ever know; but Mrs. Foley had known clearly what her work was. It was to wake up the world and wash its face, feed it, and get it to work on time. She had known from the beginning, and had accepted it.

He wondered if his own benign but vastly superior attitude toward others, his earnest efforts to rescue those who did not want to be rescued, to save those who did not even know that they were lost, were not a little juvenile, a little presumptuous.

Contributors, Sources, and Suggested Reading

P. H. Polk

by Maryanne G. Culpepper

Maryanne Gillis Culpepper, a producer/director for Auburn Television, Auburn University, holds a master's degree in journalism and communications from the University of Florida. With Bruce Kuerten, she coproduced "Lost in Time," a one-hour documentary on southeastern prehistory that aired nationally on PBS in 1985, and "First Frontier," a dramatic documentary on southeastern history (1540-1835), slated for broadcast in February 1987. Currently she is working on "Living Blues," a program on the history of blues and its impact on popular music.

Culpepper first met P. H. Polk in 1981, when she was researching a multimedia presentation for Tuskegee Institute on the life of George Washington Carver. Her interviews with Polk form the basis for this article.

For his assistance in assembling photographs for this article, the editors would like to thank Mr. Donald Polk. For more information on P. H. Polk and black American photographers, see:

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Alabama's William March

by Roy S. Simmonds

Roy Simmonds, a retired British government official, was born in London, England, and now lives in Billerica, Essex. Since his teenage years, Simmonds has had "an abiding interest in modern American literature." Over the course of the past twenty years, he has contributed articles on John Steinbeck and William March to various scholarly journals in the United States. He became interested in William March sixteen years ago, and from the moment of his first acquaintance with the Alabama author's work, Simmonds writes, he "became convinced that March was one of the most shamefully neglected of all twentieth-century American writers."

Simmonds' biography of March, *The Two Worlds of William March*, was published in 1984 by The University of Alabama Press. At present, he is writing a biography of the American short story anthologist Edward J. O'Brien, who edited the annual *Best Short Stories* collections from 1915 until his death in 1941. These short story anthologies, says Simmonds, led to his interest in modern American literature.

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