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A MERCHANT PLANTER OF THE
OLD SOUTH

BY

Josiah Moffatt

Kindness of:

Mr. Wade B. Roddey
Richburg, S.C.

A MERCHANT-PLANTER OF THE OLD SOUTH

Josiah Moffatt

William Moffatt's house was built on the brow of a wooded hill, a hundred yards north of the Charlotte-Columbia road. To the Negroes it was known as the "Big House". Sometimes a more inclusive phrase, "The Hill", was used to designate the house with its out-houses. It was not a large house except in a comparative sense. The majestic grandeur of the Colonial mansion was lacking.

It was a long, rambling frame structure, a story and a half high, with the upstairs lighted chiefly by dormer windows projecting from the front slope of the roof. There were two chimneys at each end of the house and a wide, front verandah extending its full length. Locally verandas were known as piazzas (pronounced pie-azzers). A low, L-shaped building, connected with the "Big House" by a covered passage, contained the kitchen and dining-room. This arrangement made for comfort, inasmuch as the sights, sounds, odors, and especially the heat associated with the preparation of food, were entirely eliminated from the sacred precincts of the "Big House", where the White folks awaited, in unruffled dignity and repose, the clamor of the bell announcing dinner or supper. Beyond the kitchen, within the yard inclosure, were the granary, the smokenhouse, and dairy and, back of these, outside the yard, the Negro quarters. Altogether, the group of buildings on "The Hill" presented a rather imposing front to the big road. My grandfather's store stood at the foot of the hill, right on the road. Across the road from it were the ginhouse and cotton press.

My grandfather was never a large slavenholder. He probably never owned more than two dozen slaves at one time. He amassed his fortune in the mercantile business and, while he operated a plantation of seven hundred acres, his chief agricultural interests lay in the crops of his customers, upon which depended their ability to pay their bills at the store, when they fell due in the autumn. William Moffatt began his career as a merchant on the proverbial shoestring. He was the son of a Scotch-Irish emigrant who settled on a farm in Chester District, South Carolina, about 1770, and he was born three years before our first president took office.

That was the heyday of "sturdy individualism" in America. Liberty was on a rampage, so to speak, tolerating no restraints. This was true both of states and the individuals composing them. South Carolina was one of the leading states in the loose confederacy which included the thirteen original colonies and their dependencies. Charleston was one of the four largest cities of the country and an important seaport. A poor German emigrant named John Jacob Astor had just arrived in New York. George Washington was reputed to be the richest man in America by long odds, but his actual wealth probably never exceeded a million dollars.

The Federal Government, if such it could be called before the adoption of the Constitution, exercised few powers in or over the various states, which to all intents and purposes were independent commonwealths and very jealous of their status as such. Many of the more timid and conservative citizens were filled with misgivings concerning the future of the newly launched ship of state, and openly advocated the restoration of the monarchy with another King - George Washington.

There were no industries, in even the infant stage, no government aid for any person or any enterprise, and very little capital available for any purpose. On the other hand, there were no unemploy-

ment, no bread lines, no overproduction, no labor trouble, and no liquor problem (whiskey was almost as free and widely diffused as air). Jails and almshouses, where they existed at all, were vacant most of the time. At least four-fifths of the population lived on farms.

Social and economic conditions had changed very little when William Moffatt opened his little store twenty-five years later. His meager capital did not exceed three hundred dollars, but he was a born trader and strictly honest. He prospered from the first, and it was not long before he was compelled to move from his loghouse with its nail-studded door into a more commodious store building, weatherboarded and well-lighted.

For about forty years Billy Moffatt's store was the trading center of a large territory embracing portions of several counties (then called "districts") and extending even beyond the state line. There was no considerable town between Charlotte and Columbia. The county seat was often a straggling village in which the courthouse was the only conspicuous building. There were no stores of any consequence within twenty miles of Lewisville, that being the name of the postoffice at Moffatt's store and the community in which it was situated.

People would come a day's journey, on horseback, in wagons or lumbering carriages, to trade with Billy Moffatt. They would spend the night as his guests and return home the next day. His hospitality knew no bounds and was not confined to customers. The man who was loading his wagon with hundreds of dollars worth of supplies was made no more welcome at his table than the casual stranger who happened to be in the store at meal time. Both were expected to climb the hill with him and stretch their legs under the groaning board in the dining-room. An extra mouth to feed caused no flurry in the kitchen, for "company" was expected every day. The great kitchen was constantly seething with activity from dawn until bedtime. Its fireplace was six-feet wide, and the wide flagstone hearth covered more floor space than the kitchens in many modern houses,

The kitchen cupboard, built of solid black walnut, native to the region, reached to the ceiling-beams and stretched more than halfway across the end of the room.

The cooking was all done in the fireplace or over beds of live coals on the hearth. There was no stove or range of any kind installed in my grandfather's time. The pantry shelves were always loaded with pies, cakes, and great loaves of salt-rising lightbread. Hot beaten biscuits, Johnny cake, corn pone, or delicious pan bread were served with every meal. Meats were roasted on the turnspit; hams were boiled in iron pots. Fried chicken and mush for breakfast, baked chicken and rice for dinner were regular standbys. Patches supplied roasting ears, turnips, and both sweet and Irish potatoes. The kitchen garden provided an abundance of green vegetables in season.

Quantities of jams, jellies, and preserves, including brandied peaches, were put up every summer, a large, brass preserving kettle being kept in almost constant use during the season. Blackberry wine and cordials were produced by the gallon, chiefly for medicinal purposes. They were especially designed to counteract the diarrhea which prevailed to an alarming extent among the children during the summer.

The clerks at the store ate their meals in the family dining-room, but slept at the store, in a room partitioned off for a dormitory. Their washing was done by the family washer-women. The ashopper furnished the lye for the manufacture of a home-made soap of superlative excellence, and the washer-women did beautiful work. Indeed the White folks would tolerate nothing less than snowy whiteness in their linen. Quite a number of well-trained servants were kept busy performing the varied tasks incident to such a baronial menage, but none was over-worked.

One of my grandfather's clerks, who afterwards became a leading

merchant and banker, bore rueful testimony to what he, at the time, regarded as the extreme consideration shown his Negroes by their master. In those days fresh beef was obtained, by an arrangement among certain neighbors to butcher their fatlings in rotation, so as to furnish a weekly supply for each household. Each member of the "circle" had to go or send for his portion. The erstwhile clerk declared that on a cold, dreary winter morning "Uncle Billy" would compel him to mount a horse and go after the beef, while three or four big "buck niggers" sat dozing around the kitchen fire.

Doubtless my respected forbear, who believed in stern discipline for the young, had nothing else in mind than the good of the boy's soul. He and other clerks were admitted to the Moffatt store, while mere boys, practically upon terms of apprenticeship. Not only so, but the opportunity to enter Billy Moffatt's service under such conditions was highly coveted by poor but ambitious youths, anxious to go into training for a business career under the most successful merchant of the Piedmont. The founders of several leading mercantile and banking houses of the up-country and Tennessee owed their success, primarily at least, to the business maxims of William Moffatt, whose store was the best "Business College" of its day, judging by the accomplishments of its graduates".

For many years William Moffatt hauled his goods from Charleston in covered wagons with bodies shaped like gondolas. Charleston was distant about two hundred miles and it required almost a fortnight to make the round-trip. Twice a year, spring and fall, the wagon train, consisting of five or six wagons, each drawn by two or three spans of mules, went to Charleston to receive the goods transported by water from New York and Philadelphia. The wagons were loaded, going and coming, carrying down cotton and fetching back merchandise. A white boss was in charge of the train, but the skilled teamsters were always intelligent, dependable Negroes. Of course the merchant himself could not afford a wagon train of such magnitude, but many of the large planters kept one or more crack teams for their own use and were glad enough to hire them out occasionally. There was always the proviso however that their own teamsters, to whom the mules were accustomed, should drive the wagons.

The teams of fine, matched mules were brought through the country in dröves by traders from the breeding farms of Kentucky and Tennessee. They were the pride of their owners and the peculiar joy of the dusky geniuses who drew the lines over their backs. The teamster must know his mules, individually and collectively. He recognized the fact that each long-eared hybrid was a distinct personality. No two mules are exactly alike in disposition, popular opinion to the contrary. The teamster spoke to them caressingly by name and cultivated an intimate acquaintance with the idiosyncrasies of each one of his charges.

The long, wicked-looking whip of rawhide attached to a home-made handle was seldom used by an expert teamster upon his mules. It was the symbol of his office. The rapidity with which he could unfold its sinuous length above the heads of his mules, producing a succession of sharp, explosive sounds resembling pistol shots, was truly remarkable. Skilled drivers cracked their whips so that the resultant explosions sounded like a continuous volley. This proved much more effective in enforcing discipline or producing speedy and harmonious action than stinging blows administered to the individual units of the teams.

The mule's shining harness was often decorated with little bronze or silver bells which kept up a continuous tintinnabulation when the team was on the move. The progress of a wagon train along the highway was dignified and unhurried. The matched teams, moving in perfect unison, were trained to a fast walk. They usually covered about

four miles an hour, a speed that could be maintained with ease for ten hours a day. The mules were fed at midday when the wagon train halted for a long rest. When the train stopped for the night, the mules were curried, rubbed down, and fed again.

You may well imagine the ecstatic thrill that seized the darkies in wayside fields, when the tinkling of the bells, mingled with the melodious voices of singing teamsters, announced the approach of a wagon train. Shouts of welcome, exchanges of rough but friendly badinage, and bursts of joyous laughter marked the passing of the train. It was a great event in plantation life. But wagon trains, no matter how picturesque, could not compete with railway trains. With the changing order, long hauls with wagons became unprofitable. Even in the thirties, the railroad from Charleston had reached Columbia, sixty miles distant from Moffatt's store.

In 1846 occurred the celebrated "cold summer". The season was so short and lacking in heat that Indian corn did not mature and crops in general were a complete failure. There resulted a "famine in the land" or something so nearly resembling that ancient biblical disaster that the inhabitants were thrown into a panic. Wagons proved utterly inadequate. Their antiquated transportation system completely broke down under the strain of trying to move food and storage long distances, as quickly and in such quantities as the emergency demanded. The merchants and planters of the region unanimously decided that they must have a railroad. Some years later when the Charlotte and South Carolina Railroad had been completed, the "Big House" was within seven miles of the nearest railway station, at Lewis' Turnout. The whistle of the locomotive could be heard on a clear day, and a wagon could haul two loads of goods in a day instead of one in two weeks.

There were no beautifully groomed mules to be spared for spectacular display in the lean and hungry days immediately following the Civil War. The landed aristocrats were in sore straits and the aristocratic quadrupeds shared their masters' plight. The upkeep of a big, imposing wagon with even a four-mule team spelled ruin for the poverty-stricken post-bellum planter. However, in the Lewisville community, there was one man ready to face the consequences of a romantic adherence to ancient customs. John Knox, Gentleman, was something of a dreamer and a sentimentalist and, as usual with gentlemen of that ilk, very impractical. It must have been a terrible strain on his fallen fortunes to maintain such a team after the war, but he did so for a number of years, sinking more hopelessly into the slough of debt, all the time.

We children used to run to the gate to watch the swanky Knox team go by. Long Jim McColor was the teamster, the last of the rollicking, care-free masters of the whip who, for generations, had been the envy of their fellows. We saw six stately mules of one color and size, in shining, brass-mounted harness with tiny silver bells attached, drawing a wagon that, to our childish eyes, seemed as big as a small schooner and was painted a brilliant carmine. Long Jim enthroned in solitary grandeur, his lines in hand, guided his craft with the skill of a master pilot. It was almost equal to a circus parade, but the wiser heads were shaken in solemn disapproval. Poor old John. He couldn't last much longer with that white elephant on his hands. Painful as it may seem to the romantically inclined, it must be truthfully recorded that the prophets of evil hit the nail on the head.

Long Jim McColor was a tall, lean, coffee-colored darkey with a flair for the dramatic. He was one of Uncle Henry's former slaves. Many of the freedmen retained the names of their former masters, but some of the more aggressively independent, feeling that these were symbols of bondage, discarded them for names of their own choosing. Thus, without legislative or judicial sanction, "Jim Moffatt" became "Jim McColor". It was customary to accept the new names as legal designations, in spite

of the fact that some darkies changed their names so often that they accumulated a number of aliases.

Long Jim was the reputed husband of "Aunt Viny", the fat, black goddess of the fires, who reigned over the Henry Moffatt kitchen. To be strictly accurate, the statement should be confined to the fact that he was the reputed father of most of her numerous progeny. There had been no benefit of clergy in their union, that is certain. Trial marriage is far from being a modern idea. It was quite commonly practiced among the Negroes of long ago. They just "took up" with one another at pleasure and parted as casually to "take up" with other soul mates when the fancy seized them. The mother usually retained all the children of her successive and informal matrimonial ventures. Each of these became an asset as soon as able to pick cotton or swing a hoe. An established reputation as a cook was of great value to a mother, such as Viny, after freedom had shifted family responsibilities from the master's shoulders to her own. She fed her brood from the White folk's larder, clothed them with hand-me-downs from the Big House and, of course, paid no rent for her cabin.

It may shock the sensibilities of some of the abstemious and aggressively "dry" Carolinians, but candor compels me to record the fact that William Moffatt sold liquor at his store. Furthermore, he was no teetotaler himself, although he never drank to excess. It was the custom of the times. No stigma attached to the sale of liquors and wines in bottles, barrels, and jugs. Practically all merchants keeping general stores sold liquor, as a matter of course, just as they did dry goods and groceries. No liquor was sold by the drink, as in public taverns. Whiskey and rum were drawn from the spigots of barrels and hogsheads into bottle and jugs, to suit the convenience or pocketbook of the customer. Fine French brandies and foreign wines were distributed in the original packages, to a limited clientele among the wealthy planters.

Wine was served at William Moffatt's table and a decanter of the finest brandy stood on his sideboard, drinks being offered to guests as a matter of common hospitality, visiting ministers not being excepted. Few refused to imbibe, and there was no reflection upon the Christian character of either guest or host because of this custom. My grandmother, as her two boys grew older, being persuaded that social and convivial drinking by her husband and his guests, between meals, set a bad example to her sons, finally induced him to banish the decanter from the sideboard, but wine continued to be served at the Moffatt table long after my grandfather's death and even after the close of the Civil War.

I have alluded to the droves of horses and mules from Kentucky and Tennessee, driven through the country by traders and from which the planters replenished their stables, but this was not all. Traders bought up slaves in Virginia and brought them down into the Carolinas, finding a ready sale for them to planters because of an ever increasing need for toilers in their cotton and rice fields.

It was thus that "Anthony" entered the family circle to become the playmate and, later, the body servant of "Marse Joe" (the writer's father). One of these traders in human flesh had requested and obtained permission to camp for the night, with his "wares", in an open space near the store. My grandmother, moved with compassion for the poor creatures, sent them generous quantities of food from her own kitchen and went down to the camp herself to see what else could be done to alleviate their miseries. There she saw poor, little five-year-old Anthony, sitting by the campfire, crying piteously for his "Mammy". She made inquiries and learned that the child's mother had died a few days before, soon after the "drove" began its southward march. All her motherly instincts were aroused and she gave her husband no peace until he had consented to buy the boy and give him to her.

It was a happy day for Anthony when he passed into the hands of

"Ole Miss", than whom a kinder, more indulgent mistress never lived. Anthony used to visit the old home, in my childhood. He seemed to cherish a sincere affection for the family, particularly for "Ole Miss" and for myself, the only surviving son and namesake of the idolized Josiah, his boyhood chum, who died two weeks before my birth.

He had a simple dignity of manner, a sonorous voice, and expressed himself with a purity of diction that marked him as a born orator, but he never attained any eminence except as a preacher for a small country congregation of his own people. The name "Anthony" must have been conferred upon him in Virginia. It is not at all probable that "Ole Miss" would have chosen the appellation of Caesar's eulogist for her protege. She would have recalled that he afterwards became the paramour of the infamous queen of Egypt.

The cotton gin, invented by Eli Whitney about 1790, lifted the fleecy staple to its position of supremacy as a money crop. Cotton production on a large scale could never have been made profitable without it. It was the only agricultural machine in common use on Southern plantations for more than seventy-five years.

There were many crude devices for lightening labor to be found here and there, such as corn-shellers and feed-choppers, but they had no effect on the labor market. I recall a couple of these rather futile machines at the old home. They stood, dust-covered and forgotten in a corner of the barn until they fell to pieces from senile decay. Left to themselves, the Negroes simply would not use them, but went merrily on husking and shelling corn by hand and chopping up feed with long, sharp knives.

Even in the late seventies there had been little change in the modus operandi on the farm since Colonial days. For instance, there was at that time no well on "the hill" (in the yard of the big house). Yet no one thought of trying to save time and labor by having a well dug on the hill. There were plenty of "niggers" to "tote" the water from distant sources and plenty of time to do it in. Why make a change? The water from a new well might not prove to be so good. This last named objection was not so far-fetched.

Cold, delicious, soft water was obtained from two sources, the well in the lot and the spring at the foot of the hill, on the other side of the house. Grandma was partial to the water from the spring, endowed with imaginary virtues because of early associations. The washing was done at the spring, beside the rivulet that flowed from it, known as the Spring Branch.

All the water for drinking and bathing, as well as for kitchen and dairy use, was fetched in cedar pails, by hand and head, uphill a distance of more than a hundred paces. Most of this portage was done by women servants. Persons not acquainted with the facts might picture to themselves these water carriers as poor, spiritless creatures, with forms bent and twisted out of human semblance by such heavy drudgery. Occasionally visitors from the North, full of sympathy for the down-trodden victims of the White man's love of ease, were astonished beyond measure by the poise, vigor, and graceful carriage of many of the Negro women. "Toting" three pails of water at a time, uphill, a hundred paces or more, not once but several times a day, is a form of exercise guaranteed to keep a woman in the pink of condition, to give grace and poise to the carriage, and to remove surplus fat from the abdominal area. One pail was carried in each hand and one on the head, and not a drop was spilled from the pail on the head.

A year or two before his death, which occurred in 1851, William Moffatt retired from active participation in his mercantile business. Dr. William Wylie, intimate friend and family physician of many years standing, issued an ultimatum when the aging merchant found himself unable longer to climb the hill from the store to the "Big House". His

beloved Peggy persuaded him with many entreaties to heed the warning. He surrendered the management of the store into the hands of Joseph Wylie, a capable young man who had been with him many years and could be depended on to conduct the business in accordance with the maxims and methods of its founder. He afterwards established the great mercantile house in Chester, S. C., which still bears his name. Lyle Roddey, who afterwards founded the flourishing industrial city of Rock Hill, S. C., was a youthful clerk in the Moffatt store at the time my grandfather retired from its active management. A life of comparative inactivity proved irksome to William Moffatt. He was primarily and essentially a merchant, and cared little for the leisurely existence of a wealthy planter to which he must now adapt himself. Old Tom, his faithful Negro overseer who had been intrusted with the oversight of his fellow workers for many years, was still on the job and needed little assistance or advice from his master. A pig-headed old scoundrel was Tom. He would listen reverently, hat in hand, to his master's orders and then go out and do as he pleased.

William Moffatt had to admit, however, that Tom was an invaluable servant. He jollied the other darkies along and got all the necessary work done with very little friction. The plantation seemed to run itself like a well-oiled machine. When he felt equal to the mild exertion of a horseback ride, he would mount his gently ambling Kentucky mare, after breakfast, and make a tour of inspection to see if fences were in order and the hands were busy at their tasks.

Sometimes he would take long drives over the quiet country roads, with Peggy by his side. The lovely landscape, the alternating fields and woodland glades, was viewed with an ever fresh and naive delight by one who had spent most of his days cooped up in a store. The carriage was a massive vehicle, handsomely upholstered. He had paid seven hundred dollars for it in Philadelphia. It was equipped with springs of the latest pattern which greatly reduced the discomfort of travel over rough roads. Many of the ponderous carriages on adjacent plantations were as innocent of springs as an ox-cart.

He was always tickled by the impressive dignity of his coachman, Jack (baptized Andrew Jackson). Regardless of the season, Jack's fat form was swathed in a double-breasted blue army coat discarded by some returned hero of the Mexican War. Oozing sweat at every pore, his woolly pate crowned with an ancient and battered beaver that had been white in some forgotten period of its existence, Jack was an awe-inspiring spectacle, the envy of all the field niggers" and the hero of all the kitchen wenches.

In the drowsy dusk of a midsummer day, as William Moffatt sat nodding on his front piazza, he was aroused by the boisterous laughter and singing of returning picknickers. These were his own Negroes. Usually the crop was "laid by" before the Fourth of July and the hands were permitted to go to the Catawba River on the Fourth for a big frolic and fish-fry. A jug or two of "corn" was a great aid to hilarity and enhanced the pleasure of devouring unlimited quantities of tasty catfish. The season was late this year and the work of "laying by" had continued through the Fourth, the fishfry being postponed until the work was finished.

Suddenly he noticed someone hurrying up the hill from the store. It was Joseph Wylie. He arose to meet him. "What is it, Joseph? Anything wrong at the store?"

"No, I just ran up to tell you that President Taylor died this morning."

"There must be some mistake. How could you hear the news so soon?"

"A man who has been attending court in Chester just stopped at the store on his way home. He heard Squire McAliley read the telegram in the court room."

So that was it. Morse's wonderful invention had made possible this seeming miracle. He, William Moffatt, sitting on the piazza at his home, more than four hundred miles from the nation's capital, had heard of the death of the President of the United States, on the same day that it occurred. It had taken almost a week for news of William Henry Harrison's death to reach Chester.

Steamboats, railroads, and now the telegraph. A marvellous new era was opening up for mankind. Rapid transit, instantaneous communication between distant points, these things would revolutionize business, yea, life itself. But it was not for him. He belonged to the old order and was passing away with it. He surmised, without much regret, that the next Fourth of July would not find him here.

A RICHBURG NATIVE DIES IN FLORIDA

Rev. Joseph Henry Moffatt, 76, who was born and reared in the Richburg community, died Wednesday of last week in a Tampa, Fla., hospital, and was buried the following Friday. He had been a resident of Tampa thirty-seven years. He is survived by his widow, Mrs. Mary B. Moffatt, and three daughters:

Mrs. Elizabeth Hodgson, Mrs. Nelson H. Geiger, and Miss Ruth Moffatt and a son William Moffatt, all of Tampa.

Rev. Moffatt was a man of fine literary ability and was a frequent and appreciated contributor to newspapers and magazines.

Note: The above was copied from a newspaper clipping in the possession of Mrs. R. M. Strange. Judging from the reverse side of clipping, paper evidently a Chester one, probably The Chester News.

Typed at heading of clipping is this sentence:
"Died March 15, 1944"