

Bijou he handed up his quarter, got a dime in change, and went into the small, hot theatre to watch a gangster film. Pow! Pow! Pow! That was him shooting down the cops. Pow! Pow! Pow!

"Where you been all day, Lem-u-well?" his ma asked as she bustled 'round the kitchen fixing supper.

"Over tuh the bayou. Fishin'. Me 'n Bluebelly went."

His ma backhanded at him but he ducked out of range. "Told you t' call Francis by his name."

"Yas'm. Francis, Me 'n Francis."

His pa looked up from the hydrant, where he was washing his hands and face. "Ummmp?" he said. His pa seldom said more than "Ummmp." It meant most everything. Now it meant did he catch any fish. "Nawsuh," Lemuel said.

His little sister, Ella, was setting the table. Lemuel washed his hands and sat down and his pa sat down and said the blessing while his ma stood bowed at the stove. It was very hot in the kitchen and the sun hadn't set. The reddish glow of the late sun came in through the windows, and they sat in the hot kitchen and ate greens and side meat and rice and baked sweet potatoes and drank the potliquor with the corn bread and had molasses and corn bread for dessert. Afterwards Lemuel helped with the dishes, and they went and sat on the porch in the late evening while the people passed and said hello.

Nothing was said about the quarter. Next day Lemuel took four dimes, three nickels, and two half dollars. He went and found Burrhead. "What you got beat 'bout yesdiddy?"

"Nutton. Ma said I sassed her."

"I got some money." Lemuel took the coins from his pocket and showed them.

"Where you git it?" Burrhead's eyes were big as saucers.

"Ne you mind. I got it. Les go tuh the show."

"'Gangster Guns' at the Bijou."

"I been there. Les go downtown tuh the Grand."

On the way they stopped in front of Zeke's Grill. It was too early for the show. Zeke was in his window turning flapjacks on the grill. They were big, round flapjacks, golden brown on both sides, and he'd serve 'em up with butter gobbled between. Lemuel never had no flapjacks like that at home. Burrhead neither. They looked like the best tasting flapjacks in the world.

They went inside and had an order, then they stopped at Missus Harris's and each got double ice-cream cones and a bag

of peanut brittle. Now they were ready for the show. It was boiling hot way up in the balcony next to the projection room, but what'd they care. They crunched happily away at their brittle and laughed and carried on. . . . "Watch out, man, he slippin' up 'hind yuh."

Time to go home Lemuel had a quarter, two nickels, and a dime left. He gave Burrhead the nickels and dime and kept the quarter. That night after supper his ma let him go over to the lot and play catch with Sonny, Bluebelly, and Burrhead. They kept on playing until it was so dark they couldn't see and they lost the ball over in the weeds by the bayou.

Next day Lemuel slipped up to his ma's dresser and went into the magic black pocketbook again. He took enough to buy a real big-league ball and enough for him and Burrhead to get some more flapjacks and ice cream too. His ma hadn't said nothing yet.

As the hot summer days went by and didn't nobody say nothing at all, he kept taking a little more each day. He and Burrhead ate flapjacks every day. He set up all the boys in the neighborhood to peanut brittle and ice cream and rock candy and took them to the show. Sundays, after he'd put his nickel in the pan, he had coins left to jingle in his pocket, although he didn't let his ma or pa hear him jingling them. All his gang knew he was stealing the money from somewhere. But nobody tattled on him and they made up lies at home so their parents wouldn't get suspicious. Lemuel bought gloves and balls and bats for the team and now they could play regular ball out on the lot all day.

His ma noticed the new mitt he brought home and asked him where he got it. He said they'd all been saving their money all summer and had bought the mitt and some balls. She looked at him suspiciously. "Doan you dast let me catch you stealin' nothin', boy."

About this time he noticed the magic black bag was getting flat and empty. The money was going. He began getting scared. He wondered how long it was going to be before his ma found out. But he had gone this far, so he wouldn't stop. He wouldn't think about what was going to happen when it was all gone. He was the king of the neighborhood. He had to keep on being king.

One night after supper he and his pa were sitting on the

porch. Ella was playing with the cat 'round the side. He was sitting on the bottom step, wiggling his toes in the dust. He heard his ma come downstairs. He could tell something was wrong by the way she walked. She came out on the porch.

"Isaiah, somebody's tuk **all** my missionary money," she said. "Who you **reckin** it was?"

Lemuel held his breath. "Ummmmmp!" his pa said.

"You **reckin** it were James?" He was her younger brother who came around sometimes.

"Ummmmmp! Now **doan** you worry, Lu'belle. We find it."

Lemuel was too scared to look around. His pa didn't move. Nobody didn't say anything to him. After a while he got up. "**Im** **goin'** tuh bed, ma," he said.

"Ummmmmp!" his pa noticed.

Lemuel crawled into bed in the little room he had off the **kitchen** downstairs. But he couldn't sleep. Later he heard Doris Mae crying from way down the street. He just could barely hear her but he knew it was Doris Mae. Her ma was beating her. He thought Doris Mae's ma was always beating her. Later on he heard his ma and pa go up to bed. **All** that night he lay half awake, waiting for his pa to come down. He was so scared he just lay there and trembled.

Old rooster crowed. The sun was just rising. Clump-clump-clump. He heard his pa's footsteps on the stairs. Clump-clump-clump. It was like the sound of doom. He wriggled down in the bed and pulled the sheet up over his head. He made like he was sleeping. Clump-clump-clump. He heard his pa come into the room. He held his breath. He felt his pa reach down and pull the sheet off him. He didn't wear no bottoms in the summer. His rear was like a bare tight knot. He screwed his eyes 'round and saw his pa standing tall in mudstained overalls beside the bed, with the cord to his razor strop doubled over his wrist and the strop hanging poised at his side. His pa had on his reformer's look, like he got on when he passed the dance hall over on **Elm** Street.

"Lem-u-well, I give you uh chance tuh tell the truth. What you do with yo' **ma's** missionary money?"

"I didn't take it, pa. I swear I didn', pa."

"Ummmmmp!" his pa said.

Whack! The strap came down. Lemuel jumped off the bed and tried to crawl underneath it. His pa caught him by the arm.

Whack! Whack! Whack! went the strap. The sound hurt Lemuel **as** much as the licks. "**Owwwwwwww-owwwwwwwWWWW!**" he began to bawl. All over the neighborhood folks knew that Lemuel **was** getting a beating. His buddies knew what for. The old folks didn't know yet but they'd know before the day was over.

"God **doan** lak thieves," his pa said, beating him across the back and legs.

Lemuel darted toward the door. His pa headed him off. He crawled between his **pa's** legs, getting whacked as he went through. He ran out **into** the-kitchen. His ma was waiting for him with a switch. He tried to crawl underneath the table. His head got caught in the legs of a chair. His ma started working on his rear with the switch.

"**MURDER!**" he yelled at the top of his voice. "**HELP!** **POLICE!** Please, ma, I **ain't** never gonna steal **nothin'** else, ma. If you jes let me off this time, ma. I swear, ma."

"**Im** **gonna** beat the truth into you," his ma said. "**Gonna** beat out the devil."

He pulled out from underneath the table and danced up and down on the floor, trying to dodge the licks aimed at his leg.

"He gone, ma! Oh, he gone!" he yelled, dancing up and down, "**Dat ol'** devil gone, ma! I done tuk Christ Jesus to my **heart!**"

Well, being as he done seen the light, she sighed and let **him** off. Her missionary money wasn't gone clean to waste **nohow** id it'd make him mend his **stealin'** ways. She guessed **them** heathens would just have to wait another year; as Isaiah **always** say, they done wanted this long 'n it ain't kilt 'em.

The way **Lemuel's** backsides stung and burned he **figured** them ol' heathens **was** better off than they knew 'bout.