

[Companionship on Etiwah]

No. 1

Approximately 2,500 Words.

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY [?]

TITLE: COMPANIONSHIP ON ETIWAH

Date of First Writing December 15, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed Ben Williams - Mrs. Causey & Child.

Fictitious Name Ned Strange - Mrs. Strange - Sarah Thomas - Mrs. Linton Hibbard

Street Address

Place Edisto Island, South Carolina.

Occupation Lumber Man and Paramour.

Name of Writer Margaret Wilkinson,

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Approx. 2,300 Words. LIFE HISTORY COMPANIONSHIP ON ETIWAH.

Mary Hibbard eased up on the gas. The car headed into a rutted roadway. We pulled up beside a strange Rube Goldberg-like contraption that at first sight appeared to be a junk pile in open formation. Unless forewarned, one never could have recognized a combination lumber and grist mill and sorgum refinery. Ned Strange, who "had a way with machinery," had pieced it together from all kinds of junk - cars, old pumps broken down engines, any kind of old motor that could be had. He had rigged the structure up so that the same pump could accomodate whatever machinery he chose to use. Yet everything seemed falling to pieces.

It offered a strange contrast to the scenery through which we had just passed, a road flashing stretches of waving marsh grass, landscapes of bulbous green cabbages in ordered rows, pinelands, live oak sentinels swinging wispy gray banners of Spanish moss to wave us on.

As is the rule rather than the exception, the mill was in-active, and like wise the man, who, clad in blue jeans and shirt, a cap pulled low over his eyes, stepped from the doorway of the shack just beyond the mill. The mill's creator is a part time lumber man; a man of about fifty years of age, with a splendid physique and decidedly well preserved.

Had he been fashionably tailored and faultlessly groomed, this man, bronzed by the salt island breezes, might have been called handsome except for the light of smouldering hatred that radiated from under the visor of the cap. He approached us and stopped when in speaking distance. He nodded and waited, apprehensive, for us to speak first.

Mary Hibbard said good-morning and asked if Mrs. Strange was at home.

"Yes", he muttered more sullenly than hospitably. Then he turned on his heel and withdrew into the shack, carefully closing the door behind him.

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My friend explained that Mrs. Strange was not, properly speaking, Ned Strange's wife, but rather his "companion". She usually wished to be called Mrs. Strange except when she and the man had quarreled. At such times she would announce that she "warn't no wife o'hisn nohow."

Mary Hibbard, who occupies the unique position on Etiwan of school teacher, medical, practitioner, counsellor, champion, and priestess to the ignorant whites and Negroes, makes the problems of these families her problems. She had told me that Ned Strange had first come to Etiwan five or six years ago from somewhere around B....burg, an industrial town in the interior of the state. On this first trip to Etiwan he had a wife and a family with him.

He and his family lived in the back of the little store where the Browns live now. They disappeared, bag and baggage as 3 quickly as they had come and as mysteriously. Everyone soon forgot about them. A case of good riddance! The wife had once told neighbors that Ned was "the meanest man in the world." To back her statement she said that he would not even let her write to her own daughter.

I remarked that I could well believe her from the insolent way he had looked at us.

Mary Hibbard explained that in reality his insolence came from his realization that he isn't like other people on the island. It is a defense mechanism that makes him hostile to genteel folk. He seemed to get worse all the time. When he first came to Etiwan he thought he was going to mix with the people on the island. He tried at one time or another to get both her sons to go in partnership with him and couldn't understand why they didn't.

One day Ned Strange reappeared on Etiwan as suddenly as he had disappeared but this time he did not have his wife and family with him. Instead he had a "companion". One morning shortly after his arrival, my friend was driving along the road on her way to the

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school house when a man waved her down. She stopped the car. The man was Ned Strange. Without even a salutation he said:

“Miss Hibbard, I got a companion here. She got a gal - I 4 want him to go to school with you - not with every Tom, Dick, and Harry.”

At that he called the “gal” who was about eight years old with a wizen face. She was an emaciated, pallid, timid child, apparently carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders.

“What can I do for you to help you with this child?” Mary asked.

“Well, you see, she ain't got no clothes, so bring him some clothes.”

“Anything else?” she asked.

“Well, he ain't got no books so you can bring him some books.” On second thought, “Ain't got much food so you can help with some food. That will be good.”

“Anything more, Mr. Strange?”

“Yes. Do you think the people on Etiwan will have anything to say about this companion of mine? A man has got to have someone to look after him and I got this housekeeper.”

About this time Mr. Willie MacAnnis drove up. Hearing the drift of the conversation he replied with a sly twinkle in his eye. “Why, Mr. Blank has a housekeeper and no one has ever objected.” Mr. Blank is a most highly respected millionaire winter resident. The question seemed settled with a jest. No one has ever bothered themselves about the matter of Ned Strange's companion-housekeeper though there has never been anything like it on conventional Etiwan before or since.

What with begging from friends and institutions, Mary Hibbard outfitted the “companion's gal”, Minnie Sue, and took her to school.

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Minnie Sue is now in the fifth grade, having been entered in the first grade at the age of eight. She can add, subtract, multiply, and divide without a mistake. She can make 100% in any test any time. She can spell and read about as well as any child in the class, but on account of her background she has no power of interpretation. There was no doubt as to the finality of this conclusion in Mary Hibbard's mind. "A page of geography or history means nothing to her," my friend told me. "She has gone as far as she can. But she can figure out the bills for Ned Strange's business. After all he has no way of knowing whether people cheat him or not. You'd be surprised how many people will take advantage of his inability to figure - and in how many ways."

Ned Strange did not return to where we had parked beside the mill. But in a minute a slatternly looking woman emerged from a slight opening in the doorway of the shack. She was followed by a child who closely resembled her. They were both grinning and it was obvious that they were immeasurably more pleased at our presence than the man had been.

"Lawdy, Miss Hibbard, I ain't never been so glad to see nobody. Ain't seed you fer a long time - that is to talk to - and Minnie Sue in al'lers a'talking about you. She's plumb crazy about you." She stood arms akimbo, emphasizing narrow hips and scrawny arms. Here was a walk of life where the other woman did not necessarily have to be alluring.

The mother and "companion" was a woman of 35 years, decidedly cross-eyed. Her teeth were gold-filled. The little girl had been spared these handicaps though she shared her mother's other unattractive features, straight, unkept, streaked light hair, dim blue eyes, large feet. Both were clad in faded calico dresses and sweaters covered by new aprons which undoubtedly bore the label of the "Five and Ten". The mother wore a distinctive accessory, a quilted bonnet made of a heavy dingy white cotton material. Instead of wearing it bonnet-wise, she had perched it on her head as if it were a tam. With the aspect

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presented by this head covering and silver rimmed spectacles over her crossed eyes, the woman's affable disposition was indispensable.

"Won't you all git out of the car and set with me a while? You ain't got to go right off. Minnie Sue says to me that Miss 7 Hibbard don't know how to stay still and I believe it." She pulled her sweater closer together and crossed her long arms over a flat chest. "Let's sit on that bench in the sun. Hit's right smart cold here in the shade."

"I'd like to see the mill," I ventured. "I suppose this is sugar cane, isn't it?"

The family was supplied with sirup and grist from the toll system or "gi'back" as she called it. The island Negroes for the most part bring their corn and sugar cane to the mill in small quantities from time to time, but now and again, there is a surplus of "gi'back" over and beyond that needed as supplies for the family. This Mr. Strange trades either for cash to customers or for groceries at the country store. While the income from the mill is small as well as precarious, now and again there is fifty cents or a dollar to spend for canned goods, staples and that same pipe. The family receives much charity and help from organizations or other wise it could not survive.

Ned Strange owns the small piece of property upon which he lives. He has ingeniously built a sturdy box-shaped one-roomed house of slabs from his lumber business.

On one occasion, Mr. Smith, who has a fishing lodge on the island and an up-to-date service station in Charleston, gave him an air compressor. Mr. Smith, who has an aesthetic feeling for machinery, felt kindly towards Ned Strange because of his natural gift of being able to put things together and make them work. He listened sympathetically to Mr. Strange's scheme to supply air at the rate of five cents a tire on so remote an island which boasted only two filling stations and where numerous Negroes owned cars too rickety to make the trip across the causeway to the mainland. The idea was to run the air compressor with the pump that runs the mill. Ned Strange envisioned fabulous wealth of at least \$50 a month, part of which he wished to share with his benefactor. But somehow

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nothing ever came of the scheme. The neglected air compressor had been abandoned and lies exposed to the elements, and Mr. Smith has never determined just how closely Ned Strange's gratitude parallels the definition of it as anticipation of favors to come.

There has been no marriage between Sarah Thomas and Ned Strange since their coming to Etiwan. Notwithstanding the condition of her morals, the woman likes to go to church and does go whenever she finds it possible.

Time came for us to leave. My friend had other things to attend to. Minnie Sue had been interrupted in her dish washing by our arrival.

"My dear," said Mary Hibbard putting her arm affectionately around the child, "I have a coat and some pretty little frocks for you. Come over to the car and let me see if they fit."

The child was radiantly happy and satisfied with the garments but my friend looked down at Minnie Sue's feet. She was wearing a dilapidated pair of old white canvas shoes. In hopes of completing the wardrobe, Mary Hibbard opened a bundle of clothing chosen for another family.

The woman ceased her chatter and exclaimed over a most ridiculous pair of beach pajamas that protruded from the bundle. They were of a green, yellow, red and blue striped awning material cut in a full circular pattern.

"Oh, ain't them prutty! Wonder if they'd fit me." No sooner had she expressed a wish for them than they were hers. Mary Hibbard had been at a loss as to what to do with them.

"And this hat," she gasped and picked up an amazing creation with a long feather.

"Do you need a hat?" my friend asked realizing that she must draw the line somewhere.

"I ain't got none but this one," she replied indicating the bonnet.

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“Very well, it's yours and I'll bring you a coat. Here are some shirts I thought Mr. Strange would like. My, but we really must be going.”

“Good-bye, Be good! sang out the woman made happy by newly acquired finery.