Moments in a Southern Town

‘THIS LITTLE LIGHT...’

Two hours after the President put his name to the civil rights bill last July, Nathaniel “Spray-man” Beech pulled open the wood-and-glass front door of the Holiday Inn restaurant in Albany, Ga., and dashed, like musical chairs, to the very first table he saw. In a near corner, a plump, brown-suited woman popped a white hand to her full mouth, but let escape: “Oh my soul and body!” To the right, a child pointed, and its mother slapped the tiny hand and whispered urgently. Spray-man tucked a shirt wrinkle into his black, high-pegged trousers, removed his shades, studied a water glass.

In the split moment that the door stood open, Phyllis Martin, a SNCC field worker from New York, had slipped in before him. Her skin is soft mahogany, her hair natural, a silver-black bowl about her head. She stood, dark-eyed, staring around the dining room, and I came up, after Spray-man, and stood next to her. When the wax-smiling head waitress approached, Phyllis raised her eyes a little and pointed sternly, and the waitress obediently led the way to a central table. After a mo-
ment Spray-man summoned up his long limbs, rose, breathing deep and joined us; and by the time we had ordered he was holding down a nervous grin.

But when his steak arrived, Spray-man could hardly eat it. "Jus' ain' hungry," he apologized, more to the meat than anything else. He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, and leaned over to explain: "What it is, I was expectin' everything but this. I was expectin' this waitress to say, 'Would y'all mind fallin' back out that door you jus' come in at?' The niceness got my appetite, I guess."

At this time, Spray-man was operating a shoeshine stand—among other things, for to "spray" is to hustle—in the entrance way of the Beehive Bar in Albany's Harlem. In his few years, he has seen a great deal of this country and taken his meals from many tables; yet here was one at which he had never expected to sit—nor ever wanted to. The white man could walk as he pleased on his side of town, but let him watch his step in Harlem: that was the geography of Spray-man's pride. And yet, improvised from a harsh reality though his was, pride hates all boundaries, and I was hardly surprised when he told me he wanted to come along when we tried out the new law. If he was supposed to have a right, he would enjoy it—once anyway. In the car, he was full of cracks; and then, in front of the restaurant, I felt him grow tense. A sense of Southern realities deeper than his pride told him he would have to fight, go to jail perhaps, and he was ready.

But the waitress was icily gracious all during the meal. Such was the strength of the President's signature. Nobody sat at the tables directly adjacent to ours, but nobody got up and left. Everybody stared or took pains to avoid staring. Nearest to us, a family of five giggled and glanced as if galloping through some marvelous adventure.

"Reminds me of up North," said Phyllis.

"What—the stares?" I suggested.

"Yeah ... and the music." From some hidden orifice, the tensionless, sexless music that you hear in airplanes before take-off was falling like gray rain. We decided that the next thing would be to integrate the sounds of places.

Spray-man gave up on his steak halfway through. When Phyllis finished, the waitress descended upon her plates like a cheery vulture, hurrying us. Abruptly, we were weary. "You 'bout ready?" Phyllis asked. I scraped up a little more and we rose. Spray-man left the waitress an exorbitant tip.

All heads turned to watch us leave. Several white men followed us from the foyer into the parking lot. I started the motor and we rolled out into the street. Spray-man looked out the window. "Well ... he started; and then again, "Well ..." Phyllis turned to him. "What's the matter? Doesn't progress make you happy?"

At about 2 in the morning, Sunday, July 12, Bo Riggins, manager and part-owner of the Cabin in the Pines, tapped me on the shoulder and nodded toward the door. The "Pines" is a bar and dance hall, a key club, a motel, and a restaurant all strung out beneath some scraggly Georgia pine on a lonely road just south of the Albany city limits. With some white money behind it and Bo Riggins fully at the mercy of the Dougherty County police, who are a good deal more rabid than the very rabid city cops, the nightspot had formerly been "black only." When the civil rights bill became law, I took a certain pleasure in seeing it integrated.

But, following me outside this night, Riggins was a frightened man. Sure, he conceded to me, though I had said nothing, there was the new law; but since when had law meant anything around here? Somebody might not know who I was. I might get cut, or shot, and where would be be then? He didn't have anything against me personally—nor my color—but he had to think of his business. Couldn't I understand? He paused; but before I could respond, he blurted, "Ah! Here the police now."

Sure enough, a county patrol car had rolled up, and two uniformed men were sauntering over.

"This boy causin' any disturbance?"

"No suh, but I'm scared they be some trouble. It's late..."

"You want him off yo premises?"

"He ain' did nothin', but ita be bes' I think. I don' want him aroun'..."

My mouth full of the irony of it all, I was packed off quickly to the county jail, charged with trespassing and drunk-and-disorderly—the latter a simple frame and the former a matter of law. The chief deputy told me that he didn't know what the country was coming to, and he grew red in the face. He introduced me at the "tank" door ("Comin' up, anothuh nigguh-lovuh..."), and I was pitched, biting my lips, into the company of a check-artist, an escapee, a dognapper, two mattress thieves, a wife-beater, a safe-cracker and assorted winos—all very white and proud of it.

The next day, in Harlem, a col-

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 writes for public indecency, and a simple, open hostility and perhaps the con-

ing matters somewhat, because it was white pressure of course that made Riggins do what he had done; but he was the visible opposition. And he was obstinate. Indigna-

But the reaction among Negroes might have been anticipated. The sentiments of the white men with whom I had to live for a week in jail were a sneering, almost moral dis-

ment and the con-

jecture spread in the black community, and was frustrated.

Jail is a place for talking, like a barbershop. In a south Georgia jail, real talkers in the cell with me: the escapee, who had sawed through the mattress and was frustrated.

Later in the week, a tall, solid fellow with snakes inked up and down his arms was led in to “sober up.” He never got the chance—or perhaps it was a ruse from the start. One of the deputies took a good look at his face and build and promised him a pint of whiskey if he would knock me down a few times. But the others were not much for it; they had gotten used to me and, if they weren’t about to lay hands on him in my defense, they weren’t going to encourage him either. Most of the fun for him would have been in the applause, so I got off with buying him a pint. Liquor can always be had for a price on the Dougherty County Jail black market, though you can’t be too sure of your brand. It came in a large, waxed dixie cup. He got properly loaded then, and it was necessary to lose heavily at blackjack to keep him peaceful.

In the end, most of the jailbirds came to pity me. “Boy, that ol’ nigguh lawyer a yours do some mighty fine talkin’, we gonna see you back fo long. Save you a place in the game.”

The judge dismissed both charges. Bo Riggins couldn’t remember any-

one who had seen me “drunk and disorderly” and I had several wit-

esses to swear that I wasn’t. The judge did not seem to have heard of the civil rights law—or at least considered it irrelevant and in-

applicable to the trespassing charge; but he had to dismiss it when Rig-

gins admitted that he never actually asked me to leave, but rather just complied with the apparent wishes of the police in the matter.

It seemed to have gone amazing-

ly smoothly. Outside, Attorney King explained why: An election was im-

mune. My case was virtually un-

known in the white community; the newspapers had made nothing out of it. So the judge could gain noth-

ing by sending me back to jail, and he just might catch a few black votes if he did the “nigguh lawyer” a favor. I wondered if the jailbirds would figure it out. A little later I sent them some ice cream. I was going back to the “Pines” and I didn’t know but that I would be seeing them again.

Early on, a Saturday afternoon some days later, a dark, gawky boy in jeans and sport shirt was singing a microphone and amplifier in the barren front yard of an unpainted

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eyes flicking conversation. The second, a tall and rake-thin fellow, with long, narrow sideburns, began, modestly, to enjoy himself, clapping and singing in perfect rhythm, his face glowing slightly. The third was drunk. For minutes, he seemed uncertain about what was happening or where he was; then, when things began to clear, he started singing and clapping too—or rather shouting hoarsely and beating his hands together at arbitrary and irregular intervals. At this display, his tall friend was shocked to the point of fright. He tried to get the drunk to the car, gave it up when he grew red and loud and stiffly resistant, and then simply moved away, attempting to dissociate himself.

For a long time, the drunken white boy was merely a tiny shadow in a great, fast river, really offensive only to the thinnest few among them. Then, suddenly, as if responding to some vision or internal force, he strode violently forward and demanded the microphone from the tronically—and tolerantly—smiling lady preacher, to ask: "What y' all starrin' at us fo'? We white—sho. But that ain' no reason to stare. The bill a rights done been pass'! We got a right. We gonna stay, an I'm gonna as' this kin' lady to sing This lil' light a mine fo' the white people a Albany, G-A, who need it, God knows. . . ."

The drunk's two friends were visibly mortified. Not at what he had said, but at his having said anything at all—at his having drawn unnecessary and additional attention to their presence. The first intensified his dialogue with the Negro youth as if to shut out the awful reality of what had just happened. In a moment, the taller, side-burned white man had seized his swaying buddy around the shoulders and bundled him, yelling and protesting, off to their car. The talker trotted to catch up. The car roared and the tall white waved an apologetic and helpless goodbye from the driver's wheel. The drunk was slumped in the seat, whooping. "Hooray fo' the niggers! Hoo-hoo-hooray fo' the niggers!"

But already the singer had taken up where she had left off. Nobody much bothered to hear the drunk's rantings; it was a matter of discipline, a very old discipline.

I was shooting nine-ball in a Harlem poolroom. It was dinner time, family time, on a Friday night in America, and the room was filled with people who had no better place to go. I powdered my hands and sank the winning ball in a combination with the two—and looked up to see five white hustlers appear in the doorway like apparitions out of the foggy night, combing their hair, wiping the water from their foreheads.

"Who wants to shoot?" drawled the skinniest. His voice cracked at the end, and so he repeated the question with force. It sounded belligerent, so he smiled, stupidly.

Eyes blinked. Bodies stirred. Butterball, who had been napping in the corner, rose up and stretched his bulk. He settled his red baseball cap over his eyes. "You got any money, Whitey?" When the white boy flashed a roll, I stepped back from my table. Butter' picked up a stick and called for the houseman to rack.

"What's your name, Whitey?"

For a moment, the white fellow wondered how to answer this question most forcefully, and then he simply let it out, a short nasal squeak. Butter' looked down the row of tables: "Hey, Rut! You hear that? Go on look up his daddy in the phone book, fin' out how much coin he got. I'm gonna take all

One of them immediately engaged a Negro youth in nervous,
Whitey's money tonight!" He leaned back on the heels of his tennis shoes and laughed with all his weight.

"No you aint!" But, just as heavy as Butter and infinitely meaner in the eyes, was heaving down the aisle. "Whitey got way more money'n you can have by y'self, big as you is." He stood before the rest of the white team. "Which one a you boys gonna put a ten down on this first game?"

On a Friday night, the poolroom is always crowded by 8. Tonight, when word got around what was happening, old men and young poured in until the house had to close its doors, so that the players might have space to shoot. It looked like the Olympic games; and, in a sense, it was.

Butter and Whitey were a good match. They played past midnight, and, as it turned out, Butter lost a little. On other tables, "Schoolboy" Terry and Peter "Rabbit" Harris skinned a blond-headed boy whose nickname really was "Whitey," and a laconic, bespectacled, middle-aged hustler with a beautiful if inaccurate stroke. Side bets went round and round. On the whole, the whites lost money, but not nearly as much as would be claimed the next day. When it was all over, Butter, gentelman that he is, took the crew around the corner for drinks. "How 'bout it Whitey?" he asked. "We gonna shoot a little over your side tomorrow?"

"Sure."

"Won't be no shit?"

"Not if you bring your money."

For weeks, the game ran on—the white hustlers appearing in Harlem, black hustlers visiting the white poolrooms. "It's the new law," said Butter. "Integration always starts over sport."

But not every small-town hustler can shoot nine-ball for $5 and $10 a game. Most make their little money disillusioning country boys, in from the dim lights and hacked tables of south Georgia's tinier hamlets, or the Albany workingmen, tanked up and sure that they are the greatest. "Integrated pool" was only for the best, who could win, or lose big money at big matches. The best soon knew one another and were wary; the novelty wore off and the poolrooms, white and black, returned to their normal, and tedious, business.

It is November. The man who signed a bill and integrated the poolrooms is retained in power. I wonder if Butter voted. Or Sprayman, taking time off from shining shoes.

That first night, after the Holiday Inn, he had been confused; the experience had not had any immediate meanings. But a few hours later, outside a Negro bar in south Albany, called the Playhouse, he had nodded at the crowded doorway: "Lookit all them Negroes, don't know nothin' bout what's happened yet."

A few minutes and a few beers later, he was checking the hand of a girl who was about to drop a dime in the juke box. He carried a chair to the center of the floor, climbed atop it, shouted the crowd silent and the dancing to a halt, and related, in a loud, laughing voice, the events over on the white side. A few applauded. Most listened politely for a minute or two, but soon conversation started again, and Sprayman was struggling against an indifferent current. He looked over at me, apologetically I felt. I waved with great emotion for him to forget it, but he had his hackles up and went on.

A young man with ironic eyes nudged me. "It's fine," he said. "Fine, if you got plenty money to eat at the Holiday Inn. Me, all I got's this one little quarter, an' I ain't expectin' nothin' soon. Tell y' fricin' I'm sorry, but I gotta put it in the piccolo. I'm gonna have me 25c worth a sound, an' no history . . . ."

When the music started, Sprayman glanced around angrily. But, when it was clear he was overcome; drowned in sound, he grinned reluctantly, then wide. He shrugged, stepped across the floor to replace the chair and, in a moment was dancing.