

Doll Oliver's Daddy

By Gene Booth

Doll Oliver stood on the seat beside her daddy in the old truck as he drove down to the store. There were no cars in the wide dirt space in front of his store because it was Sunday. In Wilkesville, Sunday was the Lord's Day, and most of the townspeople were in church praising Him in song, listening to the preacher, and praying. But Doll's daddy had work to do. His accounts were not in order.

Ode Oliver tried to run the store at a profit, but he had no head for business. He preferred visiting with his customers to bookkeeping. Often he forgot to charge for single items such as a loaf of bread or a quart of milk, and since most of his customers had credit with him, he lost more money than he knew. He disliked collecting his debts, too, and put it off as long as he could. His wife, Leona, was beginning to nag him about it, so he had taken his accounts book home with him, intending to start on the job and let Leona see he was working as well. As usual, Buck Jones and L. C. Cheeley stopped by, and as usual, he laid aside the work for a bull session.

Doll played on the floor while her daddy and the two men sat before the fire, talking. Her daddy's voice, rapid and excited, was saying, "I'll never forget the night when I ran all the way from Stathum, rockin' every god-damned dog in sight. You know I was a real runner in those days. But I was gettin' thirsty and thought I'd die if I didn't get me something to drink. Well, there was this old shack, not too far off the road, and I thought they wouldn't mind giving a man a drink of water. So I trotted slow-like over to the front porch, all the time keepin' one eye on the mangy hound that was slinking around, ready to attack, but he saw I had a first-full of rocks. He knew I'd use them, too. I hate god-damned dogs, anyway. Well, I tapped on the planks of the falling-down porch, and waited. I thought somebody was there, thought I heard voices inside, could see the light from a kerosene lamp. But nobody would come out. Well, I jumped up on the porch, making lots of noise, see. Didn't want 'em to think I was a prowler. Last thing I wanted was some farmer comin' out the door with a shotgun aimed. Still, no open door. Well, I decided I must have just thought I heard voices, and as I said, I was dyin' of thirst. I'd just sneak on in and get me a drink. Nobody out in those sticks ever locked a door. I was

a brave son-of-a-bitch in those days, too. I wasn't scared of nothin', too dumb to be scared. Well, I opened the door, real slow, still tryin' to watch the growlin' hound that was keeping his distance, but I wasn't about to trust that he wouldn't attack.

“It had been so dark outside that the little light from the lamp seemed real bright and I had a full view of the room as soon as I opened the door. It was empty, too. But then, I just happened to look through the crack where the door was joined to the wall, and there stood the biggest black woman I ever saw. She had a razor in one hand, a bottle in the other. I don't know who she was waitin' for and I wasn't aimin' to find out. You think I was runnin' when I left Stathum? You should have seen me shoot out of that place. I forgot my thirst and made it into Wilkesville in three crows of a cock. I'll bet my daddy's Model T didn't make better time than I did that night. And I won't never go back to that woman's place.”

Doll was excited by the story, glad her daddy hadn't been dog bitten, glad he got away from the big black woman who could have killed him. She was playing with her older brother's toy police billy he'd left when he'd gone out to play. As she listened to her daddy, she twirled it around on its leather loop, watching it go faster and faster, making her dizzy, trying to keep her eye on it. She lost control of it, and it flew straight to her daddy's head, hitting him just above his right eye. Leona came from the kitchen where she had been doing the supper dishes just as the accident occurred, just at the wrong time as it turned out. Ode jumped up from his chair and hit his wife, knocking her down onto the couch. Doll wasn't to blame, she was just a child, her mother should have been taking care of her, she ought to have been put to bed by then.

Leona lay on the couch a moment, then sat upright, still a little stunned. Buck and L.C. got up to leave, but Ode wouldn't let them go. He made them sit back down, trying to brush away the embarrassing moment with, “Hey, stay, no need to hurry off. Leona'll get Doll to bed and we'll have some peace and quiet. Leona knows I didn't mean nothin' by that. I'm just too hasty, that's all. She'll be all right.”

Leona stood up, walked over and took Doll by the hand with as much dignity as could be called upon in such a situation. She took her into the bathroom and made her sit on the stool, then washed her face and hands, dressed her in her pajamas. Doll went to

sleep as soon as her mother put her into her small bed, dreaming of giant Negro women, crouching hound dogs, and Daddy.

This morning Ode could still feel the sore spot above his right eye, and in sight of the store, he realized he'd left the account book at home.

"Damn," he said aloud and turned sharply into the store yard, shifted the gears jerkily for the return home. The sudden jolt knocked Doll off balance and she flew against the door. The impact of her body forced the faulty latch open, and she tumbled out onto the hard-packed dirt.

Doll felt her back slam against the earth and could not move or breathe. Before the truck came to a stop, it had passed over her, but the wheels hadn't touched her. She couldn't think, could not even catch her breath. She did wonder, after a moment, if this was the way Mother felt last night when Daddy hit her. She thought she should be hurt and was afraid to move when the truck stopped and her daddy ran around to where she lay. He picked her up, tossed her back onto the seat and started toward home. He glanced at his little girl. Her eyes were wide with shock, and he knew that she would cry any moment now, and he couldn't bear to see her cry.

"You're not hurt none, now. So don't turn on the waterworks. You're just surprised, that's all."

Doll thought about it. She really was surprised, but she was scared, too, and somewhere she wondered if her daddy had done it on purpose, and wanted to hurt her like he hurt Mother. She felt like crying, but she knew that would upset her daddy. She gave a sigh and tried to hold back the tears.

"You learned something, didn't you? Next time you'll hold on, won't you," Ode said. He smiled at her.

Doll nodded. She wanted to believe her daddy, but it was hard trying not to cry. Her chest and throat ached, she tried so hard. She believed her daddy when he said she wasn't hurt, didn't she? She looked at her arms and legs and didn't see any blood, just a little dried dirt sticking to her skin. She reached down and gently rubbed away the dark spot on her knee.

“When we get to the store, you can pick out any candy you want. What kind do you think you’ll choose today? Nothin’s too good for my little girl.” Ode smiled again and patted Doll’s leg.

Doll thought about the different candies in the big jars on the store counter. Mother didn’t like her to eat candy, but when she did, she should eat orange slices because they weren’t so messy. They were good, too, but not nearly as good as the chocolate-covered marshmallow of the Moon Pies. Whenever she ate a Moon Pie, the sticky, brown juice usually slid down her chin and onto her dress. Today, she’d have to be extra careful. She was wearing her Sunday School dress which hadn’t been changed when Mother decided to let her go to the store with her daddy instead of going to church with her—but she was going to have the Moon Pie, anyway. She wasn’t aware that her dress was already stained and torn from her fall from the truck.

There were other good things at the store for Doll besides the sweets. There was always someone there talking to her daddy and sometimes telling stories to her about his own little girl or boy. And there was always Nigger James—ever since he was hired to dig the storm pit behind the Oliver house. Ode Oliver called him Nigger James to avoid confusion. He meant no harm by the title, it just made life simpler since his eldest brother was also named James.

“Nigger James does a good job,” Ode said, and paid him in groceries for his help around the store. In some ways, Nigger James was better at the business than its owner. He never forgot to record a charge or the right price of the stock, and he was willing to do almost anything that needed doing. He even dug the postholes behind the store and helped Ode put up the thick ropes to make a square for the boxing ring.

Ode Oliver was more interested in boxing than he was in business. Magazines, worn from handling by Doll’s daddy and the men who hung around when they were out of work or taking a day off, were stacked on the counter or tossed in a pile on the floor. On their covers were pictures of both white and black men, naked except for their satin shorts and big brown gloves. Large letters across the tops spelled words like RING, MATCH, and BOXING. Nigger James told Doll what each letter was called and what they said when they were put together. He knew because he could read a little as well as count.

But it was Ode who told the stories that were inside the covers, stories about men and their fights to become champions. He knew that a round lasts three minutes and how many rounds each champion had to fight to win. He could tell in which round Jack Dempsey won the championship and who he'd fought from 1919 until he lost it in '26. He would get so excited he sounded as though he'd been there and seen it with his own eyes. He took just as great an interest in the fights he set up in the ring behind the store.

The first match came about when he got Jack Cheek and Lonnie Pruitt to settle their differences in the ring. Jack had accused Lonnie of poisoning his pure-bred German Shepherd. Lonnie denied it but had no way of proving his innocence. Lonnie had been bargaining for the dog when Jack came up with the ready cash before he could close the deal. Jack thought Lonnie was spiteful enough to get even by killing the animal. There didn't seem to be any way to get the two men to forget their feud.

One day, both men were at the store at the same time, and the argument broke out again. Ode told them, "I'm tired of hearing about your god-damned dog. Put on the gloves and get in the ring. Fight it out and forget it."

Other men were standing around and heard the challenge, so neither Jack nor Lonnie wanted to admit they didn't want to fight.

"Let's settle on a time right now," Ode suggested, so they agreed that Saturday at seven would be as good a time as any.

Seven was late in the day, but not dark. It had rained on Friday, and the sun hadn't dried all the puddles of water that filled the low places in the store yard. Doll was muddy from playing in them all afternoon while her mother was in town shopping. On her way home, Leona had stopped off at a neighbor's house and had lost track of the time. She decided to leave Doll at the store to come home with her daddy. Maybe that would get him home at a reasonable hour for a change. She didn't know about the fight; that's how Doll came to be on hand for it, along with half the men from town and nearby farms.

Doll sat outside drawing maps on her legs with the wet, red-colored mud, enjoying the feel of the streaks dribbling down her skin, when the men started to arrive. Some of them were just off work from the cotton mill. White pieces of fuzzy lint clung to their clothes and stuck to the day's growth of beard on their faces. They carried an odor,

musty and warm, of cottonseed and sweat. There was an additional smell of White Lightning at times, which made Doll feel sick to her stomach.

Other men came into town from their farms wearing overalls and work shirts with sleeves still buttoned at the wrists in spite of the heat, an effort to protect themselves from the sun's burning rays all day. Their clothes were muddy, too, their brogans caked with dirt from the fields. Their sweat was mixed with the odor of damp earth and horses.

A few men had stayed home all day, doing chores, cutting the grass, repairing a broken step. They had bathed and changed into clean khakis and short-sleeved shirts. They smelled, too, but it was heavy and sweet, and Doll especially didn't like it as it drifted and mixed with the sweat, dust and dirt of the others.

There were men who smoked or chewed tobacco. Many dipped snuff, spitting into the empty tin coffee cans Ode had set out. A few paid no attention to the cans and spit on the ground, making dark pools which didn't soak into the already damp surface.

When Lonnie Pruitt walked up—he lived near the store—his friends gathered around him, patted him on the back, reassured him. “You're looking good, Lon.” “You'll get ol' Cheek, all right.”

Lonnie boasted, “I never worked so hard all week in my life, and never felt so good. Because I been lookin' forward to this here fight. 'Bout time I straightened out Jack Cheek oncet and fer all.”

“You'll do it, too, Lonnie. I'd put money on it,” Buck Jones said.

Ode shook Lonnie's hand and declared, “That's a damn good idea. Nothin' wrong with showing your confidence by puttin' up your money. Come over here, Nigger James, and bring your paper and pencil.” Nigger James walked up to the group of men, took out a yellow pencil and small crumpled notebook.

“You take down these men's bets, and I'll hold their money,” Ode continued. “I don't blame these men none for bettin' on you, Lonnie. You got a damn good chance of whuppin' Jack Cheek, with your long reach and all. Ain't that right?” Ode looked from face to face, inspiring agreement and confidence in Lonnie's probable success.

Nigger James licked the end of the pencil before he wrote down the names and numbers as fast as he could. Ode took the money from outstretched hands. The men were tentative at first but began to relax and laugh about betting their hard-earned money on a

friend. From time to time, Ode would check Nigger James's figures, making sure he got it all down.

Soon Jack Cheek drove up in his black '38 Ford pick-up, and Ode rushed to greet him. He spoke loudly. "Well, here's that feisty rooster we been waitin' on. Some of these fellows been bettin' on ol' Lonnie over there. What do you think of that? I think we better remind them of how fast you are on the feet. They better look out for you. This ain't goin' to be no god-damn cakewalk."

Jack Cheek jumped down from his truck, raised his arms over his head, just like some of the pictures in the magazines. His friends clapped and shouted, "That's it, Jack. You're gonna be a winner." "I'll put my dough on Cheek. Take this here dollar, Ode, and put my name in that book."

Nigger James came over and started taking down more names, Ode took more money, and Doll listened to the men talking about which man would be the better fighter.

When the betting and talking started to die down, Nigger James took Doll's hand. "Come on, now. Your daddy's goin' to get things started. You may as well be able to see what's goin' on, bein's your mama done left you here for this."

He lifted Doll to his shoulders. She grabbed around his forehead, feeling his kinky, stiff hair, the dampness of his black skin as she settled her legs tightly around his neck.

At the edges of the crowd, he looked for a post where they wouldn't be in the way, mumbling and humming as he searched for a vantage point. Between phrases of "Go Down Moses" he mumbled, "Guess your daddy's goin' to pull another'n off. Shore wonder at times how he does it. Hated that dog—didn't want it hangin' 'round, scarin' off customers, he said. He hummed, picking up exactly where he left off before.

Then, "Pore ol' dog didn't do nothin', your daddy just down-right hates 'em. No reason to it. Don't need no reason. Still he don't never get caught. Guess he be smart that way."

His humming and mumbling were so mixed that no one around him could tell what he was saying. Doll was close and wasn't sure she heard, but she didn't ask questions. She didn't let on she heard anything. She learned more that way.

Ode Oliver tied the gloves on and announced loudly the name of each fighter as though no one there had ever heard of him. He said a little about each man. He pulled Jack Cheek to the center of the ring and said, "This here's a good man! He works hard, takes care of his family and is so fast on his feet you'll have to keep a keen eye to tell when he's down, he's back up so fast. I remember him from third grade on. It never made a bit of difference how big the other fellow was, he'd fight him. He won most of the time, too. So watch out, Lonnie, you got a real fighter here." Jack Cheek grinned as the men cheered and clapped, and then went back to his corner.

Next, Ode called Lonnie to the center and pushed him, turning him around for all to see. "Now this here man is big—just look at him. Lifting those crates down at the packin' plant has made Lonnie strong as an ox. He's got muscles you and me never thought about. And look at his long arms. Even Jack Cheek is going to have to dance a little faster to stay outta his reach."

The men clapped and shouted again. Ode waited a minute for them to stop before he said, "Now, let's get started! Buck Jones is goin' to be the referee and I'll watch the clock and ring the bell."

Buck Jones jumped into the ring and Ode went over to the side and clanged the bell for the first round. Jack and Lonnie met in the middle of the square, moved slowly around each other, poked one gloved hand, kept the other in front of his face to hide behind. From the side, someone called, "Go after him, Jack. Don't spend all your time dancin'!"

Nothing much happened in the second round either, but in the third, Lonnie Pruitt reached out and caught Jack Cheek on the side of his head, just above his left ear. It looked like an accident. Jack shook his head and staggered back as though he was losing his balance, then suddenly he dove toward the bigger man, his eyes shining fiercely. He fought wildly, striking out in any direction, sometimes hitting Lonnie, sometimes thrusting himself against the ropes when he missed.

"Jack Cheek shore got a temper," Doll heard Nigger James say, "but it ain't goin' to do him no good. No good a'tall."

Lonnie stepped around for a while, trying to get out of Jack's way. Then the bell rang and both men went to their corners to rest and get a drink of water. Doll wondered how long this would go on. She was beginning to wish she was home eating supper.

When the fourth round started, Lonnie Pruitt started out swinging, and Jack had to dance faster and faster to dodge his gloved fists. Finally, Jack ran into one of them and blood spurted out from his nose, splattering Pruitt's white t-shirt, then running down onto his own white, hairless chest. Doll thought her daddy should ring the bell for time out, but no one did anything, just yelled and cursed.

Jack watched with surprise his blood spreading over his skin and didn't move out of the way of Lonnie's next blow. The men shouted as Cheek fell to the ground, struggled to get up, struggled just to catch his breath. Doll thought he must feel as she did when she fell from the truck. He lay there while Buck Jones counted to ten, then Pruitt put his foot on Cheek's chest and waved his arms in the air.

The bell clanged again and there was a lot of commotion as two of Jack's friends rushed to take care of him. They washed away the blood, told him how good he fought, gave him excuses for losing while Lonnie pranced around looking big and important. Doll's daddy called for Nigger James to bring out the betting list, and they began making the payments.

In the dusk, under the light from the street lamp that had come on, the men collected their money and told one another stories about the fight they had just seen. Doll swung on the ropes of the ring and listened to their accounts, which seemed more exciting to her than the fight itself had been. The blood spill they described was much more awesome than the splatter she had viewed from the shoulders of Nigger James.

Even though it was past suppertime and close to dark, Doll's daddy called out, "Nigger James, get these men some Co-Colas and Moon Pies."

Nigger James motioned to Doll to help him, and they went into the store. The Negro opened bottles and offered one to each man while Doll took a sack full of the chocolate-marshmallow pies and passed them out among the men. She felt like Santa Claus giving presents out at the Baptist Church on Christmas Eve.
