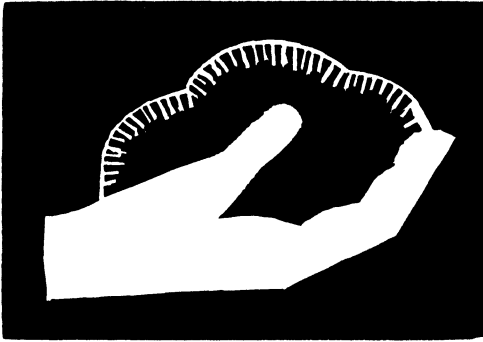


How has the fabric been stretched,
to what harp-tight exactitude,
that the bright strings are stirred into singing,
and a cry from the smouldering darkness
has broken a thread?



A Handful of Mud

Richard Mason

Sci. Sr.

THE white heat of noontime poured its brilliance over the ten neatly cultivated acres of Manney Corbett. Broad fuzzy tobacco leaves spread outward in graceful symmetry from every stalk in the long rows.

Manney shuffled along the green rows, moving his hands quickly and deftly over each plant. He yanked off blossoms and new shoots so that the leaves would grow more quickly, for big leaves meant just that much more money. No work was too hot or too dirty that might make a few extra dollars for Manney and his family.

His long gray-blue overalls, which had been patched and re-patched, were wrapped tightly around his ankles and tied with twine to keep the soft dust from sifting into his shoe tops. Manney did this by habit, for his shoes were well ventilated with cracks and holes, but a white man couldn't be expected to go barefooted like a nigger.

His hands were covered with the sticky brownish, bitter-smelling sap of the plant. As his blackened fingers worked, his mind made plans and discussed them pro and con.

OCCASIONALLY he stopped and mopped his forehead, which had been bleached white from years of sweating under the leather band of his floppy straw hat. With his hat off, he would look over his land with a critical and admiring eye. He kept close watch on his three boys working in other rows. Sometimes they got to 'cuttin' a fool' and Manney would have to 'holler' at them. Today they worked steadily and quietly, and as he watched them he hoped sincerely that he would make enough money on his tobacco this year, so he could give them a piece-a-change to spend on themselves. He knew it wasn't any fun for kids to have to sweat and work to eat. He ought to know; he had done it for twenty-one years before he had even gotten married.

He thought of past winters when there had been little food, and vivid memories crowded back. By God, it did something to a man to have to watch his kids cry themselves to sleep, holding their aching, hungry bellies. A grown man could take hunger, but kids didn't understand. He was counting on this crop to give him a foothold so that he could expand and build; in case of future crop failures, at least his family would have something to eat. But to do that, a man just had to have a start of some kind.

He turned to survey the weather, farmer-like, and noticed that it looked like rain coming up pretty fast. Funny, a man always got rain when he didn't need it. He looked at his heavy crop again, and decided that the rain wouldn't hurt it but it wouldn't do it any good either.

He stooped and picked up a clod of brown earth still flecked with white fertilizer. He crumbled it friendly-like between his palms to clean his tobacco-sticky hands.

As he spread one large green leaf in his hands he felt the thinness and frailty which was its sign of quality. Hours of sweating and grunting had gone to produce these leaves, and any man would admit it was a job well done. He wished he could pick the crop today and get it in the barn because each step done reduced the chance of losing it. But then again, he sniffed, he might burn it up while he was curing it. Farming was a gamble all right, but yet there was something about owning a piece of land that helped a man keep close to God. It was that urge that made a man want to reach down and scratch the ground and sweat on it and make green things grow out of it.

A SLIGHT tremble of thundering and the breeze rustling tobacco leaves roused him from his reverie, and he looked again at the sky behind him.

The clouds seemed to have switched back and were now jutting their blue-black faces towards him. It looked like a shower all right.

He called to his youngest, "Alec, go to the house in case yer ma needs ya."

The small boy, glad of the chance, scampered down the row towards the cabin in the cottonwoods.

Manney worked on fast now, in order to get as much done as possible before the rain. Finally he looked again at the approaching storm. He was surprised at how rapidly the clouds had reached the sky above him. The sun had scooted behind the writhing clouds, and the thunder now began to tumble overhead.

He could see rain down by Hart's plantation, and as he heard a few warning pats of water on the big tobacco leaves he waved his hat homeward at the two boys who were watching him for some sign.

He turned and walked towards the house, grabbing a sucker here and there, but his boys ran on ahead. As he neared the end of the row he saw something white on the ground. It was a round pellet of ice melting on the ground. He picked it up and let it finish melting to water on his fingers.

HE TURNED angrily and stepped forward as if to defend his field. He stooped for a clod to throw, instinctively, like a man seeking to defend himself from a beast. He clenched his teeth on a savage curse and breathed heavily and finally. The gush of the storm and its meaning drenched him, pitilessly.

Along with the rain, the stinging, ripping hailstones cut the wet tobacco leaves to dripping shreds. Manney Corbett stood with feet wide apart and head down. His heart heavy with years upon years of disillusionment, he watched his crop, his chances, beaten back into the womb of their birth.

As the rain and the hail peppered his soaked body he stood unmoving in the row, looking at a crumbled clod turning to mud in his open calloused hand.

