

# LAMB IN HIS BOSOM



PULITZER PRIZE WINNER



CAROLINE MILLER

*with an afterword by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese*

Lamb  
in His  
Bosom



*1934 Pulitzer Prize Winner for the Novel*

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*FOR*  
*Wi'D and little Bill*  
*and Nip 'n' Tuck*



# Chapter 1

C EAN turned and lifted her hand briefly in farewell as she rode away beside Lonzo in the ox-cart. Her mother and father and Jasper and Lias stood in front of the house, watching her go. The old elder who had married Cean to Lonzo was in the house somewhere, leaving the members of the family to themselves in their leave-taking of Cean. But the youngest of the family, Jake, was not there; he had fled away, his thin face hard with grief. He had laid his deepest curse on Lonzo Smith's head. Now he lay on his face under a budding willow on a sandbank of the river that ran two miles from his father's place. He hoped, with a fiendish hope that was a curse, that hairy, red worms would find out the holes in Lonzo Smith's ears, that they would crawl in and grow horny heads and furry tails, and eat out Lonzo's in'ards. But Cean would hate that; she would brew all kinds of yerb teas for him to drink. There wasn't anything to do. Cean had gone and done it; she had made her bed; now let her lie in it. She wouldn't ever know he cared, neither. She wasn't his sister any more; she was all Lonzo's. Now she would sleep in Lonzo's bed instead of Jake's. At this thought, misery almost suffocated the child; he found it hard to draw his breath out of his lungs. For he could shut his eyes and



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feel her body warming his body under the covers. She had a way of rounding his head into her shoulder, of catching his legs up against her with her strong, lean hand, and they would sleep so, their bodies fitted one to the other. In the night they might turn, and then his thin body would fit in a protecting curve along her back.

He opened his eyes, and there was the white sand against his face, magnified into little hills and valleys before his eyes. There were the budding willow branches above him, rising and falling in lifts of wind that ran down the river. He blew on a hill of sand close beside his mouth, and it fluttered down. He'd go on back and bring up the calves. They'd think that's where he was.

Cean's and Lonzo's bodies jounced gently in the slow motion of the wooden-wheeled cart. The way to their new home lay across the woods, close around the edge of the great swamp of cypress, through a little creek, and across a rise where there were huckleberries and rattlesnakes in hot weather. Farther on there were tall timbers and fine grazing; and there, six miles to the west of her mother's home, Lonzo had set up Cean's house with its broad clay-stuck chimney. There was a spring at the side under a smother of elder bushes and sweet bays; a new-set fig bush and Seven Sisters rose cuttings and a bed of pinks were beginning to take root by Cean's back door where her mother had set them. Lonzo had cut down every tree for the house, and Cean's brothers had helped him to notch them and lock them into the sturdy walls, and to line the walls with heavy planks riven from heart-pine. They had split the rails for the cow-pen, and Betsey was there now with her little pied-ed calf close against her. Lonzo would set up a springhouse for Cean, for the milk and butter, when he had his seed in the ground; and in the late summer, Cean's brothers would help him with the crib for the corn that he would raise in the new ground,

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corn for meal and grits, corn for feed for the ox. Pumpkins, peas, potatoes, melons—they would raise fields full of them; they would fare fine. Cean would water and tend such things. Her mother had told her that a woman must see to things like that—fruit, a garden-patch, milk and butter and the children; men must raise and butcher the meat and make and gather in the crops.

Cean's new bonnet was hot about her neck, She slipped it back off her head, tied the strings together under her chin, and let it swing free down her back. Her face was brown and full and bright; her mouth was wide and closed firmly over her teeth. Her hair blowsed over her temples from where it was parted in the middle. Her bright brown eyes went shyly about, seeking gentle satisfaction in the soft air, the sunshine, the thick plodding of the hooves of the ox on the slick brown pine-needles and soft sand. Her happy glance slipped shyly to Lonzo's bearded face. His neck, browned by sunlight, was moist in fine beads of sweat. Her glance moved upward to his coarse black hair that came down from under the fine hat he had bargained for last fall on the Coast. She saw the set of his large head, the set of his strong shoulders, then her eyes hurried away, a little frightened by that nearness, by the coarse black hair, the strong male shoulders, the sturdy silence of the man beside her who was her husband.

Now she was married. The elder that came through twice a year had said the marriage words over them: "Do you take this woman, Tillitha Cean Carver...?...?" After that, she belonged to him, to cook his victuals and to wash his clothes. After that, she belonged to herself, too. Now she was a woman and would churn her own butter, scald her own milk-crocks and set them in the sun to make them smell sweet and clean; now she would own and tend her little patch of herbs and melons, drop corn behind her own man, and watch it grow, and hoe the grass out from around the

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sharp, clean blades cutting through the earth. She would have her own corn, her own man, her own way of living from now on, but her eyes hurried away from his strong, sinewy neck going down into his shirt, his strong, sinewy body wet with fine-beaded new sweat.

The trail hugged the edge of the swamp, and the undergrowth pressed in close about them. It was cool and sweet here. The air was wet from the swamp water and the black, spongy bogs. Yellow jessamine sprawled high on the tree and swarms of its sweet-smelling bright blooms burst out through the green. The cypresses were new-feathered on their pale high trunks. All the swamp seemed stirred into sweet unease. In the summer it lay sluggish and fevered in muck; alligators drowsed in the mud and moccasins slipped through the water. In winter the swamp was dismal and forbidding, with the beasts screaming in the cold, and the water black and still. But now, on Cean's marriage day, yellow jessamine smothered the tops of the pine trees, maples burned aloft in the cool gloom, and all the little saplings and all the giant pines lifted the candles of their wax-colored leaf-buds, white candles on the tip of every tree, on the end of every limb, burning with slow fire into new growth. Orioles chattered carelessly. A cardinal stitched a bar of song over and over, reiterating spring. Close about them Cean heard the stealthy, hurrying feet of little creatures escaping from their path; bushes rustled in brief panic, then stilled. Coveys of partridges whirred away in sudden, frantic haste; Lonzo would trap them when the crops were laid by. And there were turkeys in the swamp and squirrels and fish—all manner of meat. Oh, they would fare fine!

Cean drew her legs closer to herself so that her skirt might escape the bamboo's little thorns that came over the cart's side to

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pluck at her. Her leg under her heavy skirts pressed close against Lonzo's right leg along the seat beside her. The road to the creek bore sharply to the left, and she pressed hard on Lonzo, leaning against her will. Fear moved through her as she felt herself so close upon him. She tried to move back from him, but could not, for the incline was more than a little steep. Her breathing came and went close against his shoulder. The ox halted and lowered his head in the little stream to drink. Bright-brown water flowed beneath them; bay leaves shone green above them. A creeper of bamboo swam on the current. Here the afternoon light was stifled to clear, pale green. Cean saw the sandy bottom of the stream worn into little ruffles by the water's slow flowing. A little way down the branch, she heard squirrels bark and swing through the tree-tops. For the first time since they had started their journey Lonzo turned his black eyes on her. He said:

“Gittin’ tired?”

She flushed and looked far down the little stream. “No, I ain’t a-tired.”

There was silence as his eyes went after hers down the stream. She had a feeling that his thoughts were close on the trail of her thoughts. She was too shy now to move farther from him. She said:

“This is a first-rate place fer yore hogs to waller in when hit’s hot.”

His voice was proud:

“Our hogs; ye’d better say.”

Cean’s eyes clouded over with shyness. She was miserable under the glance of his eyes and the tone of his voice. He said:

“The hogs’ll help keep out snakes fer ye...if ye’re scared of ‘em.”

“I ain’t a-scared....”

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His black eyes shone.

“Ye ain’t a-scared of nothin’, air ye?”

She shook her head and dropped her eyes miserably. He watched her for a moment and spoke heavily and sweetly:

“Little un!”

He turned his head quickly and chucked to the ox; the three of them moved up to the bank where the sand was washed white, and on up the rise where the palmettos whispered in clumps, where new leaves of the scrub oaks were pale yellow and green, where pines souged aloft on their great rough trunks and grass was springing, heavy and green in the open spaces, where Cean’s cow would graze.

Smoke from Lonzo’s slow-burning stumps in the new ground drifted far across the swamp. Cean saw it—a thin fog in the lowlands. And off there she saw her house, bright-yellow as the sun, new in the sun, the logs fresh from the bark, the chimney fresh from the clay in Lonzo’s hands. At the back the bright new fence rails held in her cow and calf. Far and wide about the house, holes where the stumps had been were smoking in the still air. The undergrowth had been grubbed out, the labor leaving Lonzo’s hands horny and hard, and his heavy shoulders a little stooped. The ground was broken into dark clods, ready for the seeds, yellow, black, white, to burst into bright green down the furrows. Cean could think of the house as almost hidden from sight by rows and rows of rough, rustling corn. There would be cotton at the back, and a patch of tobacco for Lonzo to dry and twist for his own taste. She would root a grape vine to spread across her back yard on posts, and tomorrow she would drop the little handful of sunflower seeds to grow for the hens and rooster her mother had given her.

The ox plodded on across the rising ground and struck into

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the new ground. The cart jolted them roughly as it went over the uneven plowed ground, making the first road to the door of their house. The house came nearer to Cean, the logs of it golden in the afternoon sunlight, the roof of it sloping sharply down to thwart the soaking rains, the doors and shutters tightly chinked to shut out the sharpest wind of winter.

Finally, there was the yard, cleared but with the soil unturned by the plow. And there was the clean, new block that led from the ground into the house. The chickens scurried past the door, feeling strange away from the great flock that was Cean's mother's. The cow lowed lonesomely down in the pen. Lonzo lifted one of his long legs over the side of the cart and jumped to the ground. He turned back to Cean, and his lips spread a little, almost disclosing his teeth in his soft, thick beard. A little shyly he held out his arms to Cean, saying:

“Come, little un!” And she gave her weight to his arms and slipped through them to the ground.

She went into the house where the floor of split logs had never been scrubbed and yet was clean, where Lonzo had set the bed-place in the corner with its depth of dry cornshucks soaked and softened in water, and dried again in recent suns. Over these shucks, that would rustle softly with the turn of their bodies, was spread the thick mattress of soft new cotton, caught between its homespun ticking with strong thread in the hands of Cean's mother. Atop the cotton mattress lay Cean's feather bed, the feathers saved from every goose for years gone. Atop this were homespun sheets and Cean's quilts, one of them the bright and dark scraps of the Widow's Trouble pattern, sewn by Cean's fingers through her girlhood. She had two other quilts—Star of the East, and Maiden's Tear—that she had pieced herself. That would be

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more than enough cover for these bright, cool nights, and before winter came again she would make other quilts. Lonzo's mother had promised wool for two comforts when the sheep should be sheared in April.

Before the deep fireplace were set the well-built chairs that Lonzo had made, the wood bright and new, the cowhide bottoms only lately stretched and cured. There was a low, wide chest along the wall, for quilts or any such thing. Across the hearth were set the iron pots and the big hoe-cake spider. From the rafters hung the sides of meat their parents had given them, and there was a keg of shelled corn in the corner; and a grist-mill was to be found in the yard to grind their corn, if Cean would but swing the rock around. From the Smiths or the Carvers, Lonzo could have as many more cartloads of corn as they should need until the crops were made and gathered in. Cean could go to her mother's any day for greens, and her own patch would soon be sown, and green in a month.

The house was ready for living. Cean's mother had made the bed and set out the pots on the fireplace. Betsey would give no milk tonight, because the calf had not been parted off, but after today Cean would be milking.

Cean unrolled the bundle of clothing she had brought with her, and placed it in the chest. She hung her bonnet on a wooden peg by the head of the bed alongside Lonzo's new hat and old coon-skin cap. She took off her fine new shoes, brushed the thin dust from them, and set them in the chest. The floor was cool to her feet as she walked about.

It was near dark. Lonzo brought firewood and set fire for cooking. Then he went out again to the cow-pen. Her mother had sent along plenty of cold food for supper, but Cean would cook on her own fireplace this first night in her new home. She sliced

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meat, and mixed meal and water and salt for cornbread. A song pushed up in her throat as she worked, but she held still because she was afraid Lonzo might notice. When the meal was spread on the eating-table, she called him briefly:

“Supper’s done.”

He came, and they ate, their glances dropping away, each from the other’s, to their victuals, their hands clumsy at breaking the bread and sopping the meat grease.

As night fell the fire on the fireplace was built up and filled the room with soft, pulsing light. Cean cleared the table and brought water to wash her feet.

Lonzo went to the bed and, stooping, brought out a roll of goods. He brought them to Cean’s chair by the fire, and spread them on the floor for her to see:

“I thought ye mought like somethin’ sorter fer ye-self.”

There was a clean-washed rug of sheepskin. There was a little chest of cherrywood not a foot high, with carved knobs and rings across the lid, and a little catch with a piece of wood no bigger than your little finger to slip in and hold it shut. There was a pearly trinket carved from a cow’s horn. There were six hairpins of cedar wood. And there were two knitting-needles of cedar, polished and shining.

Cean handled the things, each to itself. She could not decide which pleased her most. Lonzo had a turn with his hands. He could make ‘most anything.

She moved the slender needles of cedar in the motions of knitting. The wood slipped, cool and quick, through her fingers. She spoke shyly:

“I’ll be knittin’ ye stockin’s ‘fore cold weather.”

He watched her hands in stubborn embarrassment:



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“Better knit ye some, ye own self. . . .”

She said:

“I wasn’t askin’ fer no pretty things such as these, Lonzo.”

He explained, simply:

“I jes’ give ‘em to ye, to be a-givin’, little un.”

She laid the pretty things in the chest, and spread the rug beside the bed. She washed her feet before the fire; going to the shadows by the bed, she dropped her dress about her feet and slipped a shift that her mother’s hands had woven over her head and down her body. She slid beneath the cover while the soft shucks whispered huskily, and turned her face to the wall until Lonzo should come.

When Cean moved from the fire into the shadows by the bed, Lonzo left the house and walked through the dark to the cow-pen. The night was a thin and gauzy blackness, not dark and heavy as are moonless nights. There was not much of a moon, though, only a little one, cool and high, that foretold rain in the open, downward swing of its curved blade. Before it was full, that moon would empty itself of rain, soaking the new ground. Lonzo must put in his seed. He must spread a shelter for Betsey and her calf in the near side of the cow-pen. The cow was used to rain, doubtless, but the little pied-ed feller might not like it, and a lean-to would keep rain off of Cean at milking-time.

Lonzo walked to the rough rails of the cow-pen, and leaned upon them. Betsey, hearing his footsteps, came to the fence and answered his low-spoken “Coa” with a plaintive moo. He fingered her ear, roughing the short, coarse hair with his finger nail. He moved his hand down across the bony sockets of her eyes. Always the feel of a cow’s forehead reminded him of the sightless stare of bleached skulls that he sometimes saw far from any clearing, where

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critters had wandered off to die. Dumb things don't like to die with others looking on. They'll drag off by a branch somewhere, and lie down, and nobody will ever know until you see the buzzards circling lower and lower above some thin cypress, or sitting in solemn black rows along dead limbs, glossing their greasy-black feathers, one by one. There beneath, if you have a mind to, you can find a hide ripped open, and lank bones picked clean.

Lonzo could hear the little calf nuzzling his mother's bag. He wasn't hungry; but he'd better suck while he could.

Tomorrow he'd be shut up while his mother went to crop grass on the slope toward the swamp.

Lonzo turned and faced his fields, leaning his weight upon his elbows on the fence. His eyes went through the thin darkness and saw his land ready for planting—through the thin dark, and saw the crops leaning heavy above the soil. The corn would go in there, and the cotton across yonder, and a pea-patch close beyond the cow-pen. Peas would bring partridges in the fall. He'd have to fix a garden-patch for Cean's seeds, and a washing-shed by the spring. He'd have to clear out some of the brush; a moccasin will slip up on you if you give him a chance. He must fix Cean a cypress wash-block like his mother's, and a dug-out wash-trough with a soap-rack. He had the tree picked out; all there was to do was to strip it and dig it out and set it up on four legs. He had enough to do to keep him busy till frost, what with Cean's little jobs. And there was the land to fence, once and for all, with no tellin' how many rails to be split.

The little moon hung lonesome in the early night, unwearied in fulling and shrinking over woods and waters. Lonzo found it over his left shoulder through space clear of tree or cloud; it meant good luck—rain and good luck. He walked back to the house with

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slow eagerness. He would put the old brood sow's pen on the other side of the spring; she'd rake straw in another month. He walked heavily across the back yard, and pushed in the back door with unwanted roughness. He'd get a hound-puppy or two to chase rabbits and to keep the house from seeming so still.

Cean heard his coming, and her lashes quivered on her cheeks. Hidden under the thin white coverlids with their soft fringe of lashes, her eyes were warm and bright.