

The Curator Says...A chance meeting, an intersection of two lives, all clouded by mystery and seen through a thin film of bourbon haze—this is the backdrop of Harry Hooper’s gripping tale. The setting is coastal South Carolina; the tone is antebellum, dark and rich. Past and present merge, the tide ebbs and flows, and the reader is spellbound.

A Very Rich Man

Harry Hooper

I once lived in a very old house on a point of land that was surrounded by what was called a river but was in fact blue salt water. The house was located in the most beautiful town in South Carolina. The streets of the town were, and still are, narrow. Their names included Craven Street, Carteret Street, Laurens Street, and the street I lived on, East Street.

To the south and east of my front porch was a vacant lot that I would mow so that it would not become overgrown with weeds. To the north and east of the vacant lot was a rectangle the size of two basketball courts that was called the “lagoon.” An old brick seawall outlined the lagoon. When the tide was high, the lagoon filled with salt water, and when it was low, the black, muddy bottom of the lagoon was exposed. The black mud had a foul odor, in a way, but it was a smell that I had grown to like. Moreover, I knew that it teemed with living things that sustained the greater ocean that ultimately surrounded it.

One day, neighbors and the local newspaper informed me that a mansion was going to be moved from a plantation on an island and that it would be installed on the vacant lot. Indeed, soon after, a barge with a large house on it was pushed to the waterfront by a tugboat. The house sat on a trailer with many wheels and was pulled onto land by a huge truck and then other huge trucks and little trucks with lifts like insect legs advanced before it. Swarms of men with plastic helmets busily cut and then restored power lines and telephone lines so that the house could move to its appointed place, the lawn south and east of my old house.

In a matter of days masons erected a six-foot-high foundation of old brick beneath the house, and then the house was expertly lowered onto the foundation and the trucks and the masons left. The follow-on crew included carpenters and painters, plumbers, and electricians. I wandered over to the property and inquired as to who owned the house and who had the kind of money required to get so much work accomplished so rapidly. A plumber informed me, “This house is owned by Mr. Neil Sandburg of Chicago, Illinois. He is a very wealthy man.”

Considering that they were tradesmen from the Low Country, these men worked exceedingly fast, and soon the ancient mansion looked like a new house. It

was painted white and had green shutters on tall windows and was two stories high and had a wide front porch.

When the work was finished the workers left burning a solitary porch light that was illuminated all day and all night. It was clear that no one was living there.

Weeks went by and no one cut the grass, so from time to time I would mow the yard and dispense Spectracide to address the fire ant hills that would appear.

One afternoon I noticed an attractive, tall, brunette lady standing on the front steps with a girl that appeared to be of the age of a college student. I walked over to the steps and introduced myself. The lady told me that she was Sally Sandburg and that she was from Chicago and that the house was going to be their vacation home.

Her daughter said, "Hi, I am Sydney."

I said, dumbly, "I have never known a girl to be named Sydney."

It may have been at this point that I noticed that Sydney was possessed of exceptional beauty. Her startlingly blue eyes were framed by her long dark hair that was held in ponytail fashion by an elastic band. She was slender of body and almost as tall as me. She stared at me curiously. A light wind blew through a nearby palmetto causing it to shiver in the afternoon sun, and I think I shivered a little also.

Sydney had a bicycle, and I had a bicycle, and we took to riding together in the afternoons. We went up and down Bay Street where the stores were and often rode over the tiny bridge that allowed the salt water to fill the lagoon at high tide. We stopped on occasion on Craven or Pinckney or Green Street to visit porches where friendly neighbors would invite us to enjoy cucumber sandwiches that were often served with gin. We talked a lot. I suspect she had never been around a real Southern man, and she was curious about me.

Mostly, she talked about her father, who had been in the army and had graduated from Harvard Law School and had passed the Illinois Bar but was required by his father to work in the family meat packing business instead of practicing law. Also because, she said, "The meat business provided the megabucks."

Sydney left soon enough for Ann Arbor and one day I saw a man at the mansion. He was about my size and perhaps twenty years older. Many afternoons after work I would see him and wave at him, and he would wave back, but we never talked until the time that I am shortly to relate. He was Neil Sandburg. He had obtained a yardman to cut his grass and attend to the fire ants.

In early September of that year a little north breeze blew in and rustled the palmettos so that they sounded like someone wadding up typing paper. The air

chilled a little as it will do for a day or so, weeks or months before the mild winters would come to that part of the Low Country of South Carolina. That was when, one afternoon, Neil Sandburg called to me from his back yard.

“Hey, Harry. Come over. We need a drink of bourbon.” I sauntered over and shook his hand, and he led me through the back door and into the main part of the house. The front two rooms were bisected by a great staircase. As I faced the street there was a living room on the left and a dining room on the right, and they were furnished magnificently. We went onto the front porch that somewhat overlooked the lagoon, empty and muddy at that time, and sat down in rocking chairs. There was a table between us, and upon it was a bucket of ice and a fifth of Wild Turkey whisky. Neil Sandburg filled two glasses with ice and poured Wild Turkey into each.

“You don’t want to adulterate that with water, do you?”

“No,” I said.

He seemed to know a lot about me. I suppose Sydney had informed him.

“You are a Marine Judge Advocate, I know. You were a forward observer in that fracas in Vietnam. First Marines. With the infantry. Fun stuff, combat.”

“Fun enough, I guess.”

“I was a platoon leader with McArthur’s bunch in Mindoro and Luzon. I was going to get drafted so I left school. I was a junior at Michigan at the time. I was really a kid. Brave though. It’s not hard to be brave when you are a kid.”

“Well, I’m not so brave anymore,” I replied.

“You are from that little town on the Alabama River. Selma. The one that was in the news. Racial strife and all.”

“Yep,” I replied. “There was quite a bit of strife. I was attending college at the time. I don’t know much about it really.”

The sun set and tide water began to slowly fill the lagoon, and we drank and talked about all sorts of things, but he always worked to drag the conversation back to Luzon.

“I liked the jungle and the paddies. I liked the smell, you know. The smell of the jungle after a thunderstorm. I liked the smell of the explosives and of the rifle smoke. I remember the moon over the paddies at night. Sometimes they would come at night. They were ready to die, those guys. They would come right at us sometimes.”

I tried to direct the conversation back to Harvard or Chicago or anything, and for a while I would have success. From time to time he would refill the ice bucket, and when the fifth of Wild Turkey was emptied I suggested that I leave but he brought out another bottle and we continued to talk into the night.

Near midnight he invited me up to his attic.

"I have something to show you," he said. I followed him up the great staircase and then up some smaller stairs and then up a narrow staircase that led to the attic.

There were a lot of boxes in the attic, which was illuminated by a single incandescent light bulb that hung from a rafter. There were some empty five-gallon paint cans, and we each sat on one, and the Wild Turkey and the ice bucket were placed on another. I was drunk enough to wonder if I could make it down the stairs without falling.

Sandburg fumbled among the boxes and found a shoebox that he slowly opened.

"Look at this," he said, and showed me a handful of buttons and a belt buckle that were obviously from a Japanese soldier's uniform. Then he handed me a very old leather wallet. It was the soldier's wallet, and in it was a faded picture of a young girl about the same age as Sydney, I suppose. There was also a picture of a family with a young man in it that undoubtedly had once worn the uniform with the buttons and the belt buckle. I felt suddenly sad.

Neil Sandburg took the contents and set them aside and incredulously said, "Did you grow up with Tarver Rountree in that little Alabama town?"

I was taken aback.

"Sort of," I said. He was fifteen years older than me. "He went to Harvard Law School, like you."

"I know," Sandburg said. "I entered law school after the war. He was in my class at Harvard. I worked like a dog night and day to be first in my class in law school and he beat me. He beat me just a little. I was second. I really hate Tarver Rountree. I hate him. I hate his guts. I really do."

I was feeling a little dizzy. I told him that I was leaving and descended the stairs to the front porch and saw that the tide had filled the lagoon.

The dark water was reflecting a bright moon. I stumbled down the narrow street, and I was glad to be back in my house.

After that night I never saw Neil Sandburg again. I suppose he went back to Chicago.

Harry Hooper Says...A native of Selma, Alabama, Harry graduated from Auburn with a BS in business administration. He holds a JD from Mercer and an MPA from Florida State. While at Auburn he was on the *Auburn Plainsman* staff. He served two combat tours in Vietnam before becoming a JAG in the Marine Corps. He is a retired lieutenant colonel. He was a member of the Florida and Georgia bars and remains a member of the Alabama State Bar. Before retiring and leaving Tallahassee, Florida, he was the Deputy Chief Administrative Law Judge of the State of Florida. He and wife Sue moved to Auburn in 2013 because it truly is “the loveliest village.”