

Sut Lovingood

Edmund Wilson

One of the villains of Lanier's novel *Tiger-Lilies* is a poor white from Tennessee named Gorm Smallin, who deserts from the Confederate army and becomes a Yankee agent. He has been forced into the army by the hero's father, a country gentleman named John Sterling, and when the Yankees, invading Tennessee, have been burning down houses there, he swears revenge upon Sterling for involving him in this disaster. " 'Hit's been a rich man's war,' " he says to himself, " 'an' a poor man's fight long enough. A eye fur a eye, an' a tooth fur a tooth, an' I say a house fura house, an' a bullet fur a bullet! John Sterlin's got my house burnt, I'll get his'n burnt. John Sterlin's made me resk bullets, I'll make him resk em! An' ef I don't may God-a-mighty forgit me forever and ever amen!' " And he eventually burns down Sterling's mansion, which has been made by Lanier, in his fable, to stand for the old way of life in the South.

The malignant Tennessee "cracker" had already been introduced into literature by the Tennessee journalist George Washington Harris, who invented a comic character called Sut Lovingood and exploited him for fifteen years as a narrator of fantastic stories and as a mouth-piece for political satire. These sketches, of which the first appeared in 1854, were printed not only in the local press but also in a New York sporting paper. Sidney Lanier may have known Harris: he was something of a public figure in Knoxville, which is only fifteen miles from Montvale Springs, where Sidney Lanier's grandfather Sterling Lanier, whose Christian name he had used for the family name of his hero, possessed the impressive estate which is also made to figure in *Tiger-Lilies*; and he must certainly have known about the Lovingood stories. These stories were collected,

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in 1867, in a volume called *Sut Lovingood: Yarns Spun by a Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool*, which was reviewed by Mark Twain in a San Francisco paper and to which he perhaps owed something; but Harris's work, after his death in 1869, seems to have been soon forgotten, and it was only in the thirties of the present century that in the course of the recent excavations in the field of American literature—such writers as Bernard De Voto, Constance Rourke and F. O. Matthiessen began to take an interest in Sut Lovingood.

Bernard De Voto thought that it might be a good idea to have the Lovingood stories "translated" out of the dense hillbilly dialect in which Harris had tried phonetically to write them, and this suggestion was taken up by Professor Brom Weber, who published in 1954 a selection of the Lovingood pieces slightly expurgated and transposed into a more readable language. This version was not, however, an entire success. In attempting to clean up Sut Lovingood and make him attractive to the ordinary reader—an ambition probably hopeless—Mr. Weber has produced something that is not of much value to the student of literature. He is correct in pointing out that Harris, in trying to render Sut's illiterate speech, has inconsistently mixed written misspelling, intended to look funny on the printed page—though Sut has never learned to write—with a phonetic transcription of the way he talks; but the writing does have a coarse texture as well as a rank flavor, and to turn it, as the editor has done, into something that is closer to conventional English, and to dilute it with paragraphs and strings of dots, is to deprive it of a good deal of this. By the time Mr. Weber gets done with him, Sut Lovingood hardly even sounds like a Southerner; it is fatal to the poor-white dialect to turn "naik" and "hit" into "neck' and "it." What is worst, from the scholarly point of view, is to comb out "words [that] are obsolete and others [that] are probably meaningless to all but a handful of contemporary readers." If the book was to be reprinted, the text should have been given intact, and the unfamiliar words as well as the topical allusions explained. Mr. Weber makes no effort to do this, nor—though Harris, at the time of his death, was preparing a second volume—does he add any new material except for three little lampoons on Lincoln. Sut himself is depicted on the jacket as a stalwart and bearded mountaineer, a portrayal that has nothing in common with the dreadful, half-bestial lout of the original illustrations.

One is also rather surprised at the editor's idea of deleting "three lines of an extremely offensive nature." One of the most striking things about Sut Lovingood is that it is all as offensive as possible. It takes a pretty

strong stomach nowadays-when so much of the disgusting in our fiction is not rural but urban or suburban-to get through it in any version. I should say that, as far as my experience goes, it is by far the most repellent book of any real literary merit in American literature. This kind of crude and brutal humor was something of an American institution all through the nineteenth century. The tradition of the crippling practical joke was carried on almost to the end of the century with *Peck's Bud Boy*, and that of the nasty schoolboy by certain of the writings of Eugene Field, a professional sentimentalist, who, however, when working for the *Denver Tribune*, betrayed a compulsive fondness for puerile and disgusting jokes: cockroaches and boarding-house hash and colly-wobbles from eating green peaches. But the deadpan murders and corpses of Mark Twain's early Far Western sketches are given an impressive grimness by the imperviousness to horror their tone implies, and the nihilistic butcheries of Ambrose Bierce derive a certain tragic accent from his background of the Civil War. The boorish or macabre joke, as exploited by these Western writers, does perform a kind of purgative function in rendering simply comic stark hardships and disastrous adventures. The exploits of Sut Lovingood, however, have not even this kind of dignity. He is neither a soldier nor a pioneer enduring a cruel ordeal; he is a peasant squatting in his own filth. He is not making a jest of his trials; he is avenging his inferiority by tormenting other people. His impulse is avowedly sadistic. The keynote is struck in the following passage (I give it in the original Tennessean):

"I hates ole Onsigthly Peter [so called because he was selling encyclopedias], jis' caze he didn't seem tu like tu hear me narrate las' night; that's human nater the yeath over, an' yeres more univarsal onregenerit human nater: ef ever yu dus enything tu eny body wifout cause, yu hates em allers arterwards, an' sorter wants tu hurt em agin. An' yere's anuther human nater: ef enything happens sum feller, I don't keer ef he's yure bes' frien, an' I don't keer how sorry yu is fur him, thars a streak ove satisfackshun 'bout like a sowin thread a-runnin all thru yer sorrer. Yu may be shamed ove hit, but durn me ef hit ain't thar. Hit will show like the white cottin chain in mean cassinett; brushin hit onder only hides hit. An' yere's a littil more; no odds how good yu is tu yung things ur how kine yu is in treatin em, when yu sees a littil long laiged lamb a-shakin hits tail, an' a dancin staggerinly onder hits mam a-huntin fur the tit, ontu hits knees, yer fingers will itch to seize that ar tail, an' fling the littil ankshus son ove a mutton over the fence amung the blackberry briars, not tu hurt hit, but jis' tu disapint hit. Ur say, a littil calf, a-buttin

fus' under the cow's fore-laigs, an' then the hine, wif the pint ove hits tung stuck out, makin suckin moshuns, not yet old enuf tu know the bag aind ove hits mam frum the hookin aind, don't yu want tu kick hit on the snout, hard enough tu send hit backwards, say fifteen foot, jis' tu show hit that buttin won't allers fetch milk? Ur a baby even rubbin hits heels apas' each uther, a-rootin an' a-snifflin arter the breas', an' the mam duin her bes' tu git hit out, over the hem ove her clothes, don't yu feel hungry tu gin hit jis' one 'cussion cap slap, rite ontu the place what sum day'll fit a saddil, ur a sowin cheer, tu show hit what's atwixt hit an' the grave; that hit stans a pow'ful chance not tu be fed every time hits hungry, ur in a hurry?"

In view of this, the comments on Sut Lovingood by our recent academic critics are among the curiosities of American scholarship. We find Mr. Franklin J. Meine, in *Tall Tales of the Southwest*, speaking of this hero's "keen delight for Hallowe'en fun [*italics the author's*]-there is no ulterior motive (except occasionally Sut's desire to 'get even'), no rascality, no gambling, no sharpening. . . . Sut is simply the genuine naive roughneck mountaineer, riotously bent on raising hell," and again, "For vivid imagination, comic plot, Rabelaisian touch and sheer fun, the 'Sut Lovingood Yarns' surpass anything else in American humor." "Ultimately," asserts Mr. Weber, "the mythic universalities such as heroism, fertility, masculinity, and femininity emerge over a bedrock of elemental human values which Sut has carved out in the course of his adventures, values such as love, joy, truth, justice, etc. These are only some of the positive concepts which Sut has admired and championed, and it is no small feat that they emerge from behind a protagonist who has ironically been deprecated by his creator. This is humor on a grand scale."

Now, Sut Lovingood can be called "Rabelaisian" only in the sense that he is often indecent by nineteenth-century standards and that he runs to extravagant language and monstrous distorted descriptions. Unlike Rabelais, he is always malevolent and always excessively sordid. Here is an example of his caricature at its best:

"I seed a well appearin man onst, ax one ove em [the proprietors of taverns, evidently carpetbaggers] what lived ahine a las' year's crap ove red hot brass wire whiskers run tu seed, an' shingled wif har like ontu mildew'd flax, wet wif saffron warter, an' laid smooof wif a hot flat-iron, ef he cud spar him a scrimpshun ove soap? The 'perpryiter' anser'd in soun's es sof an' sweet es a poplar dulcimore, tchuned by a good nater'd she angel in butterfly wings an' cobweb shiff, that he never wer jis' so sorry in all his born'd days tu say no, but the fac' were the soljers hed

stole hit; a towil then,' 'the soljers hed stole hit;' a tumbler,' 'the soljers hed stole hit;' 'a lookin glass,' 'the soljers hed stole hit;' a pitcher ove warter,' 'the soljers hed stole hit;' 'then please give me a cleaner room.' Quick es light corn the same dam lie, 'the soljers hed stole hit too.' They buys scalded butter, caze hit crumbles an' yu can't tote much et a load on yer knife; they keeps hit four months so yu won't want to go arter a second load. They stops up the figgers an' flowers in the woffil irons fur hit takes butter tu fill the holes in the woffils. They makes soup outen dirty towils, an' jimson burrs; coffee outen niggers' ole wool socks, roasted; tea frum dorg fennil, and toas' frum ole brogan insoles. They keeps bugs in yer bed tu make yu rise in time fur them tu get the sheet fur a tablecloth. They gins yu a inch ove candil tu go tu bed by, an' a litt nigger tu fetch back the stump tu make gravy in the mornin, fur the hunk ove bull naik yu will swaller fur brekfus, an' they puts the top sheaf ontu thar orful merlignerty when they menshuns the size ove yer bill, an' lasly, while yu're gwine thru yer close wif a sarch warrun arter fodder enuf tu pay hit, they refreshes yer memory ove other places, an' other times, by tellin yu ove the orful high price ove turkys, aigs, an' milk. When the devil takes a likin tu a feller, an' wants tu make a sure thing ove gittin him he jis' puts hit intu his hed to open a cat-fish tavern, with a gran' rat attachmint, gong 'cumpanimint, bull's neck variashun, cockroach corus an' bed-bug refrain, an' dam ef he don't git him es sure es he rattils the fust gong. An' durn thar onary souls, they looks like they expected yu tu b'leve that they am pius, decent, an' fit tu be 'sociated wif, by lookin down on yu like yu belonged tu the onregenerit, an' keepin' a cussed ole spindel-shank, rattlin crazy, peaner, wif mud daubers nestes onder the soundin board, a-bummin out 'Days ove Absins' ur 'the Devil's Dream,' bein druv thar too, by thar long-waisted, greasey har'd darter, an' listen'd to by jis' sich durn'd fools es I is."

As for the "fun" of Sut Lovingood, it is true that Harris explained his aim as merely to revive for the reader "sich a laugh as is remembered wif his keerless boyhood," and that he liked to express his nostalgia for the dances and quiltings of his youth; but even in one of Harris's pre-Lovingood sketches that deal with one of these, the fun seems mainly to consist of everybody's getting beaten to a pulp, and in the Lovingood stories themselves, the fun entirely consists of spoiling everybody else's fun. He loves to break up such affairs. One of his milder devices is setting bees and hornets on people. In this way, he ruins the wedding of a girl who has refused his advances and dismissed him with an unpleasant practical joke, and puts to rout a Negro revivalist rally-for he runs true

to poor-white tradition in despising and persecuting the Negroes. He rejoices when his father, naked, is set upon by "a ball ho'nets nes' ni ontu es big es a hoss's hed" and driven to jump into the water. Sut gloats over "dads bald hed fur all the yeath like a peeled inyin, a bobbin up an' down an' aroun, an' the ho'nets sailin roun tuckey buzzard fashun, an' every onst in a while one, an' sum times ten, wud take a dip at dad's bald hed." This leaves the old man "a pow'ful curious, vishus, skeery lookin cuss. . . . His hed am as big es a wash pot, an' he hasent the fust durned sign ove an eye-jist two black slits." Sut, who supposes himself to be his mother's only legitimate child, has nothing but contempt for his father as an even greater fool than himself, who has bequeathed to him only misery, ignorance and degradation. Most of all, however, his hatred is directed against anybody who shows any signs of gentility, idealism or education. On such people, under the influence of bad whisky, to which he refers as "kill-devil" or "bald face," he revenges himself by methods that range from humiliation to mayhem. His habit of denouncing his victims as hypocrites, adulterers or pedants is evidently what has convinced Mr. Weber that Sut Lovingood cherishes "values such as love, joy, truth, justice, etc." But he is equally vicious with anyone who happens for any other reason to irritate him. In the case of an old lady who loves to make quilts, he rides into her quilting party with a horse he has driven frantic, ripping up all the quilts and trampling the hostess to death. This is Sut's only recorded human murder, but animals he has more at his mercy, and he loves to kill dogs, cats and frogs. It is not in the least true, as another of Sut's encomiasts has said, that pain does not exist in Sut Lovingood's world. On the contrary, the sufferings of his victims are described with considerable realism, and the furtively snickering Sut enjoys every moment of them. It is good to be reminded by Mr. Meine that his hero is never shown as addicted to gambling or sharpening.

Nor is it possible to imagine that Harris is aiming at Swiftian satire. It is plain that he identifies himself with Sut, and his contemporaries referred to him as Sut, just as Anatole France in his day was referred to as M. Bergeret. Sometimes, George, I wishes," says Sut, addressing his creator, "I could read and write just a little." George Harris himself had had apparently at intervals-but a year and a half of schooling, and it is obvious that he is able to express himself a good deal better as Sut than he can in his own character. He had been steamboat captain, farmer, metal-worker, glassworker, surveyor, sawmill manager, postmaster and railroad man-none of them for very long and none with any great success. It is not known how Harris got along during the years of the Civil War.

He seems to have dragged his family from pillar to post in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia. His wife died in 1867, leaving him with thret small children. He is evidently speaking of himself, in his preface to *Sut Lovingood*, when he makes his hero explain that he will "feel he has go his pay in full" if he can rouse to a laugh "jis' one, eny poor misfortini devil hu's heart is onder a mill-stone, hu's raggid children are hungry an' no bread in the dresser, hu is down in the mud, an' the lucky one a-trippin him every time he struggils tu his all fours, hu has fed the famishin an' is now hungry hisself, hu misfortins foller fas' an' folle faster, hu is so foot-sore an' weak that he wishes he wer at the ferry."

George Harris had anticipated both the protest and the plea of Helper' *The Impending Crisis*. He represented the same stratum as Helper: that of the white "non-planter" who had got himself some education. We know nothing of Harris's early life except that he had once been a jeweller apprentice; but his origins seem to have been humble-it is not know what his father did or what became of his parents-and he shared wit what were called the "poor white trash" something of their consciousness of limitation and of their bitterness against those who did not want them to escape from it.

In Unionist eastern Tennessee, George Harris never wavered from h original allegiance to the Democratic party, which in the South represented the artisans and farmers as against the industrializing Whigs. But he failed in an attempt at farming as well as at his several industri projects-his sawmill, his glass manufactory, his metal working shop-and it is plain that a sense of frustration-"flustratin'" is one of Sut's favorite words-is at the root of the ferocious fantasies in which, in the character of Sut, he likes to indulge himself. Yet he also uses Sut as a spokesman for his own sometimes shrewd observations, and this rath throws the character out as a credible and coherent creation, since he is made to see the world from a level which in reality would be beyond him. The effect of it is more disconcerting than if Sut were simply comic monster, for it makes one feel that Sut's monstrous doings rea express, like his comments on the local life, George Harris's own ~~mental~~ ity. It is embarrassing to find Caliban, at moments, thinking like a hum being.

But the book is not without its power, the language is often imaginative and Sut is a Southern type, the envious and mutinous underling, whi it is well no doubt to have recorded, and which Harris could do better than Lanier. Mr. Weber says truly that Harris has something in common with Caldwell and Faulkner. He is thinking of the tradition of "folk humor"; but what is more fundamental is that these writers are

attempting to portray various species of the Southern poor white. Sut Lovingood is unmistakably an ancestor of Faulkner's Snopses, that frightening low-class family (some of them stuck at Sut's level others on their way up), who, whether in success or in crime or both, are all the more difficult to deal with because they have their own kind of pride -who are prepared, as Mr. Weber points out in connection with their predecessor, to "take on the whole world." All that was lowest in the lowest of the South found expression in Harris's book, and Sut Lovingood, like A. B. Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, with its grotesqueries of ear-chewing, eye-gouging fights and yokelish hunts and balls, is needed perhaps, to counterbalance those idyls of the old regime by Kennedy: Caruthers and Cooke and the chivalrous idealism of Sidney Lanier.

The dreamy nobility of a man like Lanier and the murderous clowning of Harris are products of the same society, and the two men have something in common. George Harris did not share Helper's politics: he was all in favor of secession. Nor was his Sut disaffected like Lanier's Gorm Smallin, who burned down his master's mansion. From the moment of Lincoln's nomination, George Harris turned Lovingood loose on the Unionists. Here is a passage from one of his libels on Lincoln-to call them satires would be to give them too much dignity-of which still another infatuated editor, Mr. Edd Winfield Parks, has said that "though good-humored, they reveal his [Harris's] feelings," and of which Mr. Weber, who includes them in his volume, has said that Lincoln "might not have enjoyed [them] as much as a secessionist would' but that "he would have laughed at the exaggeration of ugliness so customary in frontier humor." Sut Lovingood is supposed to be accompanying Lincoln on the latter's incognito journey through Baltimore on his way to the inauguration, and Lincoln is supposed to be terrified by the threats of the Maryland secessionists: "I kotch a ole bull frog once an druv a nail through his lips inter a post, tied two rocks tu his hine toes an stuck a durnin needil inter his tail tu let out the misture and lef him there tu dry. I seed him two weeks arter wurd, and when I seed ole Abe I thot hit were an orful retribution cum ontu me; an that hit were the same frog, only struched a little longer, an had tuck tu warin ove close tu keep 'me from knowin him, an ketchin him an nailin him up agin; an natural born durn'd fool es I is, I swar I seed the same watry skery look in the eyes, and the same sorter knots on the backbone. I'm feared, George, sumthin's tu cum ove my nailin up that ar frog. I swar I am ever since I seed ole Abe, same shape same color, same feel (cold as ice) an I'm d_____ ef hit ain't the same smell."

Sut's tirades after the defeat of the South are vituperative on a level

that almost makes the passage above seem the work of a sensitive artist. A new rancor, a new crushing handicap have been added to his previous ones. He can only spew abuse at the Yankees. The election of Grant seems a death-blow. According to Professor Donald Day, the principal authority on Harris, one of the last of the Lovingood stories, called *Well! Dad's Dead*, which appeared in a Tennessee paper on November 19, 1868, was inspired by this event. I am not sure that I can accept Professor Day's idea that Sut Lovingood's moronic father has here come to stand for the Old South. He passes, in any case, without lament: "Nara durn'd one ove 'em [the neighbors] come a nigh the old cuss, to fool 'im into believin' that he stood a chance to live, or even that they wanted him to stay a minit longer than he were obleeged to. . . . That night [after they had buried him], when we were hunker'd round the hearth, sayin' nothin' an' waitin for the taters to roast, mam, she spoke up-'oughtent we to a scratch'd in a little dirt, say?' 'No need, mam,' sed Sall, 'hits loose yearth, an' will soon cave in enuff.'" Sut has always claimed that his father sired him as "a nat'ral born durn'd fool," and his habitual falling back on this as an excuse for both his oafish inadequacies and his sly calculated crimes strikes the only touching note in these farces.

The creator of Sut himself did not long survive Sut's father. Returning from a trip to Lynchburg, where he had gone on railroad business and to try to arrange for the publication of a second Sut Lovingood book, he became very ill on the train, and so helpless that the conductor at first thought him drunk. He was carried off at Knoxville, and died there. His manuscript disappeared. The cause of his death is not known, but it is reported that just before he died, he whispered the word "Poisoned!"