

Pride and Privilege

By Les Pendleton

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CHAPTER ONE

By three p.m., everyone on the floor of the South Carolina Journal was doing double-time trying to finish their particular task for the six p.m. deadline. This outpouring of journalistic adrenaline had been a narcotic for Oscar Phipps for forty years. The faces and names of everyone he worked with had changed a thousand times, but the focus and rhythm of the collective task remained constant. Even though, as editor-in-chief of the state's largest daily, he had more than enough deadlines of his own to meet, he nonetheless took a few minutes about this time every day to savor the mental pictures that had been his lifeblood for so long. There were editors with completed articles stacked deep in front of them, checking each for its merits and shortcomings with a bold red pen. Corrections in place, the articles would be given to one of the young apprentices who earned the right to staff a keyboard by running from desk to desk and between departments, keeping the large wheel rolling.

The building was turn-of-the-century southern, with rough-faced brick walls on the exterior and plaster on the inside. The pressed tin ceiling he had admired for so many years had been covered by much lower and drabber white acoustic tiles. It lacked any of the real architectural substance of the decorative embossed tin, but it undoubtedly saved considerable expense in heating the place. In a compromise attempt, some of the antique woodwork details had been spared and the floor was still the heart-pine planking that had been too rough and uneven for the bean counters to cover with a low maintenance tile. The one "given" was a computer terminal in front of everyone, eliminating the rhythmic clicking of old mechanical typewriters, and replacing it with silent percussions on the

keyboards of dozens of computers. All said, it was a nice blend of the old and new South.

The thing that pissed Oscar off the most about this transformation into a twenty-first century operation was the politically correct concession to health mongers, who demanded that no smoking be allowed in the building. They had even gotten the Fire Marshal to conspire with them. This meant Oscar's prized cigars could not be lit, depriving him of the cerebral impact nicotine had on his creative process. Their loss, he determined. Just to show them he hadn't been put in his place, he kept an unlit stogy in his mouth most of the time. That way, he could still gather a little of the taste he cherished and he had something to chew on when his own adrenaline got pumping. That didn't happen as often as it used to. He had pretty much seen it all.

Amidst all of this organized pandemonium, two dark-suited visitors looked out of place. Oscar spotted them immediately, and followed their progress from the main entrance of the editing floor to a runner who pointed them in his direction. His years covering the gamut of stories in South Carolina had made Oscar adept at determining people's occupation from their appearance. These two were not newspaper types... most likely government hired hands, and not locals. He surmised they were either from the Governor's office or one of the myriad federal agencies he had grown to despise. Professional problem originators he had deemed them. With an air of over-importance, they marched briskly towards him. Their trained countenance had been developed like so many other bureaucrats in an attempt to intimidate the general public into believing they held some kind of innate power over them. They should be respected, feared and responded to immediately. To Oscar, they were comical. He had walked in the presence

of the most powerful men of his time and been treated as an equal. His reputation as an upright journalist, one who kept his integrity in a time when that was not the norm, had earned him the respect of everyone in his industry. The Pulitzer Prize he had picked up along the way did not hurt his stature either. These two intruders were obviously not aware of his history and approached him brusquely. The first to enter through his open door without knocking asked,

"You Oscar Phipps?"

He threw out the question as if he were owed an answer. Oscar played with them.

"Could be. But before I take any questions, I have a few of my own that need answering. Who are you? Who do you work for and don't you think it's rather rude to come bursting into a private office without knocking, overlooking the courtesy of calling beforehand and asking if I had the time to see you?"

Taken back, the older of the two men, only about thirty, replied.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Phipps. You're right. I'm David Jernigan and I work for Senator Morton. He's ill and may not live. He's in a D.C. hospital and told us to come get you immediately, that is of course if you are Mr. Phipps."

"I am. Keep on with your story."

"That's pretty much it, sir. He had a stroke last night and the doctors said with his advanced age and condition; his chances at recovery are not good. He's very fragile, but this morning he called me in and said to come down here and bring you back with me no matter what it took."

Pleased with the young man's retreat to civility, Oscar continued to direct the impromptu meeting.

"Dwight Morton is an old friend of mine and if he needs me I'll certainly take the time to go see him. I know him well enough to gather that there's more to this than just his needing to tell me good-bye. You fellas get a coffee and park it here for an hour. I'll run home and pack a bag and be back shortly. There's a flight out of here to Washington at 4:30 p.m. everyday that we can make. You call and get me a ticket and I'll be ready to leave in time to catch it."

Jernigan reached in his coat pocket and produced an airline ticket.

"You're already booked, Mr. Phipps. Here's your ticket. Seat 17C- window."

Oscar smiled and as he hurried out, replied. "I'm convinced you work for Dwight now. Just stay here and I'll be right back."

"We have a rental car outside, sir. If you don't mind, how about we drive you to pick up your bag and then go straight to the airport? Less chance for a foul-up that way."

"I swear, you young government types are something else. Hitler would have felt right at home here. All right, let's go."

They exited through the swirling office, stopping only long enough for Oscar to fill in his Assistant Editor, Esther, on what was happening. That accomplished, they all hustled to the waiting car.

Oscar's small-framed house was dark and cold. Since his wife left, he devoted himself to his work and was home only a couple of nights a week. The high degree of cynicism he had developed by reporting the news for so long had been amplified by the bitterness of divorce. Aside from the paper he had no life. The truth of the matter was,

he had always been married to the newspaper business and his wife just got tired of being the other woman. There was a couch in his office and had grown to feel at home there. He considered selling the house dozens of times but could never bring himself to completely let go of a time when there was more to his life than just putting words on paper. It had grown disheveled over the years, and gave him a depressed feeling when he spent much time there alone. He entered quickly, picked up a couple of clean shirts and pants, and threw them into a small overnight bag. He then retreated to the waiting car.

As they drove towards the airport, Oscar studied the narrow streets of Florence. It remained a wonderful time capsule of the old South. As the car went from block to block, the noise generated by its tires would alternate between the smooth, continuous hiss of contact with asphalt and pounding on sections of road still paved with cobblestones. They were brought over from Europe as ballast in the holds of sailing ships. Though he had seen most of what the country had to offer, Oscar still preferred his sleepy hamlet and the nostalgic feelings it gave him. Even though there were newer sections that could be interchanged with any commercial street in the United States with no one the wiser, there were still rows of general mercantile stores that had remained constantly in use since the turn of the century. There were many scenes from the ancient South that still remained and they always brought him back to his youth spent in such territory.

Ahead, half blocking the road, workers from the Royal Chicken processing plant were picketing as they had been for months. Several dozen protestors, mostly black, stood outside an eight-foot chain-link fence that surrounded the dirty red brick building. To the casual observer, it could easily pass for a prison. Nestled on a lane of old cedars

and Spanish moss, the factory looked the same as it did eighty years earlier, with the exception of many layers of dirt and grime. The paper had been covering the strike and its occasional splattering of violence. Oscar asked Jernigan to pull over alongside the largest group of workers for a moment so that he could speak with one of their organizers.

As they pulled to a stop, Oscar got out and quickly walked over to the group's spokesman, Alonzo Chavis. Now in his seventies, Alonzo had been an activist for many years. He and Oscar met many times when Oscar was a reporter covering the volatile affairs of the civil rights movement throughout the South. Alonzo was always nearby. He was an eloquent speaker and even though he was often associated with more outspoken activists, Oscar considered him to be a moderate, with a reasonable frame of mind. They shook hands warmly and Oscar inquired as to how things had been going.

"Any progress yet? Everybody still talking?"

"Well, Oscar, after two months of getting nowhere, I'm afraid this is one battle we're going to lose. Most of our people just can't hold out much longer. The union is out of strike pay and management won't concede anything. I guess the struggle will just have to go on a little longer. Why don't you cut us some slack down at the Journal and look out for the black community on this one?"

The sparkle could be seen in Alonzo's eyes as he saw the possibility of working on Oscar's conscience a little bit. Though old by most people's standards, with a head of thick gray hair, Alonzo was large and robust, and the vitality he still possessed was directly attributable to his involvement in the civil rights movement. It had been his inspiration, foremost in his thoughts all of his adult life. He had a great laugh and

enjoyed using it, punctuating every other sentence with samples, even when the topic was serious. He was hard not to like. By trade he was a pastor, as could be told by his black suit and clerical collar, but by avocation he was an activist. Here he performed his finest sermons.

Though friends for many years, their view of the "struggle" differed greatly. Oscar never failed to address the issue as if his view couldn't be said too often.

"Alonzo, this is not a civil rights issue; it's an economic issue. The people who run this place could care less what color their workers are. Hell, they live in Connecticut. They just want the cheapest labor they can find, even if they're green. That's why they built this factory down south to start with, looking for low overhead."

"Brother, you ain't ever going to see it, are you? There aren't any green people out here on the picket line, now, are there? They're every one black with the exception of Hector and his family, and they might as well be."

"Well, old friend, you and I have been going round on this for a long time. I sympathize with anyone trying to get by on minimum wage, and there's no doubt in my mind that they're pushing the workers here, but it's not because of their race. Look, I'm going out of town for a short while to see Senator Morton. He's had a stroke and wants to see me. When I get back, you come down to the office and I'll see what we can do to get both sides back together and your people working again. What do you say to that?"

"Any help will be appreciated. That's too bad about Dwight Morton; I hadn't heard. Is he all right?"

"From what I've been told, he's in bad shape and might not make it."

"I hate to hear that. Now there's a white man who understands what it is to be black and poor. We never had no friend any better than him. You tell him that we will all be praying for him, you hear me?"

"I do, Alonzo. Well, I better run before these youngsters working for the Senator have a hernia. See you next week."

They shook hands once more and Oscar jumped back in the car. With Jernigan growing more concerned about time, they sped to the airport. It made Oscar chuckle to see sweat breaking out on the foreheads of his young chaperones. He felt most young people were tied up in a knot worrying too much about being successful. He knew because he had been there himself. At their age he could only have been described as "driven."

From the small airport in Florence, they caught a commuter plane to Charlotte. Oscar liked the boarding procedures in large airports over the smaller one in Florence. The more sophisticated docking ports had large snake-like tubes that protruded from the terminal to the door of each plane and it was easy to forget that you were getting ready to go thousands of feet into the atmosphere in a man-made machine. At the small airports you boarded by means of a step-like ramp that was literally pushed out to the plane. Oscar always tried to not look at the great quantities of grease and oil smeared on the wings in the areas near the engines. It gave him too much to worry about on the flight, as he never felt comfortable in the air.

Once in Charlotte, they'd connect with the main carrier for the rest of the flight. By the time they arrived there and made the connection, a heavy rain had started. Coupled with the approaching darkness, it lent a dreary atmosphere to the entire trip.

Oscar planned on catching a nap on the way to D.C., but the stormy night was producing enough turbulence to cancel that prospect. So, in a half-awake mode, he let his thoughts drift back to his first meeting with Dwight Morton.

In the summer of 1947, the Broad River overflowed its banks. It ran southward towards Columbia, and just north of there, in the small town of Peak, the black community was completely washed out. Several residents drowned and the rest had no place to live. At that time, there was no mixing of the races; not socially and certainly not by living in the same communities. People of each race had their own section of town where they lived as if the other didn't exist. With no housing available to them, their plight was becoming quite serious. Oscar, working for a small daily in the area, was sent to cover the story. The whole question of civil rights was still an embryo at that time, and there were very few champions for such an unpopular cause, especially in the rural South. Dwight Morton was a wealthy farmer and merchant from a small town near Columbia. His family had been one of the first to run a large plantation in the area and their fortune had not only survived the Civil War, but the Great Depression as well. In fact, they seemed to prosper even when all around them, others faltered. The entire Morton family was an institution in the area, well known and respected. Dwight had inherited his father's share of the fortune while he was still very young. His father had passed away when Dwight was twenty, leaving a green kid to oversee huge farming and mercantile interests in the state. He was, however, cut from the same cloth as his predecessors and was up to the task. He did have a peculiar side to him, though: he felt the calling to raise the flag of civil rights, even though it could possibly ruin his business. There were lots of folks being hung in effigy, and many crosses being burned by their

neighbors in the Klan. Dwight's friends and associates tried to dissuade him from this course, but to no avail. Once he started in a direction, he rarely stepped aside.

He was disturbed by his neighbor's unwillingness to share their resources with the besieged black community, and decided to help them out himself. First, he had large tents brought into the area, and set up a temporary housing base, where black families could stay dry and watch out for their children until he could figure out the best course of action. It was there Oscar ran into him, under the canvas of an imported circus tent where they both found shelter from the continuing rain.

The first thing Oscar noticed about him was how tall and thin he was. He had a bushy head of white hair and thick eyebrows the same color. In manner and appearance he could easily have passed for a relative of Mark Twain. He walked a little stooped over, and had the warmest smile and most inviting personality of anyone Oscar ever met. Being one of two Caucasians beneath the tent, Dwight noticed Oscar's presence quickly, and walked over to him, hand outstretched. One would never have guessed he was one of the wealthiest men in the state. He was frank and engaging.

"Dwight Morton here, and you are, sir?"

"Oscar, Oscar Phipps. I'm from the Lexington Banner. I came to see how things were going here. It looks like they're making a little progress. Is the tent your idea?"

"My idea, my tent. And this is just temporary. I'll figure how to help these nice folks and, before long, this little flood is going to be the best thing that ever happened to them. We're going to make some big improvements in this community."

"If you don't mind my asking, why are you doing this? What's in it for you?"

"Peace of mind Oscar, nothing more. You a God-fearing man?"

"I'm a Baptist."

"That'll work. Are you not your brother's keeper? That's what the Good Book says we should be."

"Well, you just don't see people crossing color lines to accomplish that very much."

"Just stay here a few days and you will. That's a promise."

And so he did. Oscar remained long enough to watch a very unusual man undertake the impossible. The tents were soon replaced with a dozen or so small-framed houses and the beginnings of what would become Morton, South Carolina. To keep the town going, Dwight purchased land in the area and sharecropped with many of the families he saved. On a gamble, he dug out a large lagoon and dammed it up beside the Broad River. He imported thousands of baby catfish and began what would become Flood Catfish Farms. Very few would ever have seen the opportunity there. Later he explained to Oscar.

"Hell, in every misfortune there is opportunity. I'm just willing to consider misfortune the first step in an otherwise very sound business proposition."

Oscar suspected, despite the philosophical explanation, Dwight's real motives were purely humanitarian. He seemed to have a real affinity for the underprivileged, especially the black community.

As time went by, their paths crossed many times, primarily during tumultuous political upheavals. Dwight soon found that with few friends in the government, he would have to get involved himself, if any lasting changes were to be made. Two terms

in the State Legislature were followed by victories in the United States House of Representatives and then the Senate. His political career made his name a household word. Even though many die-hard racists and segregationists despised him, he prospered in all he did and shared it with those less fortunate than himself. Oscar never questioned his motives.

Oscar's pleasant memories were interrupted by a sudden jolt. The plane had begun its descent. After a young stewardess gave him a polite reminder, Oscar put his seat in its upright position and buckled his seat belt. Through the window he could see very few lights on the ground. The stormy weather had the Capital shrouded. As the descending aircraft bucked its way through the storm-tossed sky, Oscar repeated his flight ritual. Even though he had flown hundreds of times, he always found himself making the same promise to his Creator: if He would just let him get on the ground this one time, he wouldn't violate the beautiful atmosphere with his presence in the future. Five minutes later he was on the ground. They bypassed the baggage area, Oscar having only a carry-on bag and his escorts a briefcase between them, and went straight to a waiting car. Through the slick, rainy streets they sped to the hospital.

Washington Metro Hospital was bursting with activity. In an area so dense with every manner of humanity, it was the norm. Senator Morton's being there, coupled with his high profile and the lack of current information on his condition, had resulted in a large contingent of news crews. In the parking lot, several media vans with satellite dishes mounted on their roofs stood out above the rest of the vehicles, and in the hospital lobby were at least two-dozen reporters waiting for a briefing on the Senator's condition.

Jernigan showed his credentials to security and escorted Oscar through the halls, towards the room where Senator Morton was being treated.

It was not hard to pick out the Senator's room. Outside the door stood a uniformed Marine Corps guard and a Capital staff police officer. They were carefully regulating traffic in and around the hall. No one, especially the press was allowed near the entrance to the room. Jernigan and his cohort approached the guard, who recognized them, and explained who Oscar was. Jernigan's assistant turned out to be not such a bad sort, actually a very reserved and polite young man named Tom Bohring. Oscar kidded him that with his quiet nature and such a name, it was pretty obvious what his moniker must have been growing up. He followed them to the door of the room. As Jernigan entered, he was met immediately by a stern-faced nurse. She informed him that a team of doctors was examining Dwight at that moment and the staff would be attending to him for a while after they were finished. They should wait in the critical care waiting room until they were called. She was a woman not to be trifled with. Jernigan pointed out Oscar to her and asked if she would notify him when it was permissible to see Dwight. She agreed and the three men went back to the small lobby.

"Mr. Phipps, if it's OK with you, we need to run back over to the office and see what's happened since this morning. If the nurse calls you, just go on in. We'll be back before too long. And Mr. Phipps, don't expect a lot. It's a miracle he's still here at all.

"I understand. See you fellows later."

Oscar walked over to a small row of hard-backed chairs, grabbed a six-month-old magazine off a table and sat down. The chair was not much of an improvement over the airplane's gravel-stuffed corduroy stool, he thought. As he sat, he noticed the only

other occupants of the small cubicle. They were two young black boys, one around sixteen and the other much younger, maybe five years old. They were ragged-looking with dirty sports jackets and blue jeans, and the usual set of oversize, unlaced, high-topped tennis shoes. These were also in pretty dismal condition with more than one hole in each boy's pair. He spoke to them.

"How are you young men doing tonight?"

The older boy didn't acknowledge that Oscar had said anything. As is so often the beauty of children, the younger boy sheepishly looked at Oscar and replied,

"Fine. My Momma's getting sir-gery now."

"Is that right? What's your name?"

"I'm Cody and this is my brother Marcus. He's fifteen. He plays football."

"Is that right? Do you play too?"

"No sir, I just watch."

"Me too, Cody. Have they told you anything about your mother, Marcus?"

Oscar directed the question to the older of the boys. It was clear that he was upset and nervous about the situation.

"She'll be fine."

The answer was curt. Here was a bitter young man. Cody spoke up again.

"My Momma's heart wasn't working right so the doctor is fixin' it. Ain't that right, Marcus?"

Marcus remained silent for an extended breath and then replied,

"She's gonna be fine."

Cody sorted through the magazines beside Oscar and his eyes lit up as he recognized a character on the cover of a children's book. He carried the book over to Oscar.

"Mister, Can you read this to me?"

Oscar was taken back by his trusting innocence.

"Sure, I'll be happy to....at least till a nurse calls me. Sit here beside me."

The young boy jumped quickly up on the adjacent seat and Oscar started reading to him. Once again, Marcus ignored them. Every so often, Oscar caught him sending a glance their way. The youngster sat quietly and took in every word intently, demanding to see the illustrations accompanying each page. After nearly an hour, Jernigan and Bohring returned.

"You still haven't been in yet, Mr. Phipps?"

"Not yet, but Cody here has been keeping me company."

Jernigan went over and spoke to the guard and came back over to join Oscar and Bohring.

"He says it won't be long. Just one nurse in with him now and she's just checking his blood pressure."

After another ten minutes, the Marine Guard came over to where the group was seated.

"Mr. Jernigan, you may go in now. They've finished working with the Senator."

Oscar stood up and handed the book to his young friend.

"Here Cody, save our place and maybe we can read some more later."

"Thanks mister.....what's your name?"

"I'm Oscar."

"Thanks Oscar. Me and Marcus will be right here if you need to read some more."

"OK, I'll see you fellows later."

Dwight Morton was in bad condition. His body was attached to numerous hoses and monitors and if his eyes had not followed the three men as they entered his room, it would be easy to assume that he was already on life support. His wife Dorothy had died many years before and with no children of his own, there were no relatives there to comfort him. With all his worldly accomplishments and fame, he was getting ready to take his final journey alone, with no loved ones there to see him off. Oscar studied the sadness of such a scene for a moment as he moved over to the bedside. Dwight's eyes fixed on his, and the old man gamely lifted his hand several inches in the air for Oscar to grasp, which he did.

"Hi Dwight, it's Oscar. I've come to see how you're getting along. You don't look so bad. How are you feeling?"

Dwight shook his head weakly in a negative response. The bushy head of white hair was still there, but the bright blue eyes were dimmed and the pallor that accompanies the elderly during their final hours had descended upon him serving notice to those around him that these were his last hours. He was thin and the skin on his arms looked as though it were stretched over his skeleton. His complexion was waxy and his body was cold to the touch. There was no need to try and cheer him up. He knew the prognosis of his situation only too well. He squeezed Oscar's hand a little tighter and began to whisper. Oscar leaned over to try and hear. There was an urgency in his frail whisper.

"Oscar, thank you, thank you for coming. I need to talk with you before they carry me away from here. I'm not going to make it this time and I need you to help me set a few things right."

"I'm here, Dwight. Whatever you want, old friend. What do you need to tell me?"

Even in his weakened state, he searched his mind for the right words.

"Get a chair and some coffee."

He looked at Jernigan as he said it and the look was enough. David had worked for the Senator long enough to almost read his mind.

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Phipps?"

He shoved a chair towards Oscar as he spoke.

"Just ask; one of us will be here around the clock."

"Coffee and a sweet roll sound good. I'll be talking with Dwight while you're gone."

He fumbled around in his overnight bag and produced a pad and pencil and a small cassette recorder.

"OK, Dwight, is there anything we can do for you before we get started?"

He shook his head again and Oscar could see the tension in Dwight's gesture.

"All right Dwight, what do you want to talk with me about? I'm gonna take notes and record you if that's OK with you."

Dwight slightly nodded yes. Oscar set the recorder beside the pillow in an attempt to pick up as much of the conversation as possible. The Senator, slowly and with the faintest of voices, began to speak.

"I'm dying, Oscar. I haven't got much time. It's OK, I'm an old man and I've had a good life, no regrets. But there's something that happened a long time ago, sixty years or more that I've got to clear up. I want you to be the one to hear it cause I trust you to tell this the way it should be. You've known me for a long time. The things I've tried to do; I don't want it all ruined by this. You'll know how to put it in the best light. I want to tell you about a young man I knew a very long time ago. His name was Pickle Mather."

"Pickle?"

"That's right. Like a cucumber. Pickle Mather."

As the old man began talking about the past, his eyes seemed to brighten a little. Oscar's curiosity had been piqued, as he knew the Senator to be a serious individual. Either his condition was bending the normally rational intellect he possessed or Oscar would be hearing something that Dwight Morton considered pretty damned important.

"You know, Oscar, I wasn't born in Columbia. I grew up in Lydia, just a little west of Florence in your neck of the woods."

"I had heard that somewhere before, Dwight. Pretty country."

"It is. Now don't interrupt me; I lose my train of thought too quickly. It was a different world then, one I liked a lot better. I really miss how simple the times were. Not that we didn't have our share of problems. It's just that they were our problems and we could usually work them out. We didn't have fifty different special interest groups dictating how everything was going to be handled. Hell, maybe we should have. Anyway, it was about I guess....1925 or 26. My family lived out in the countryside on

the most beautiful farm you ever saw. Over two thousand acres we had. It was as manicured as the White House lawn and I loved every minute I ever spent there."