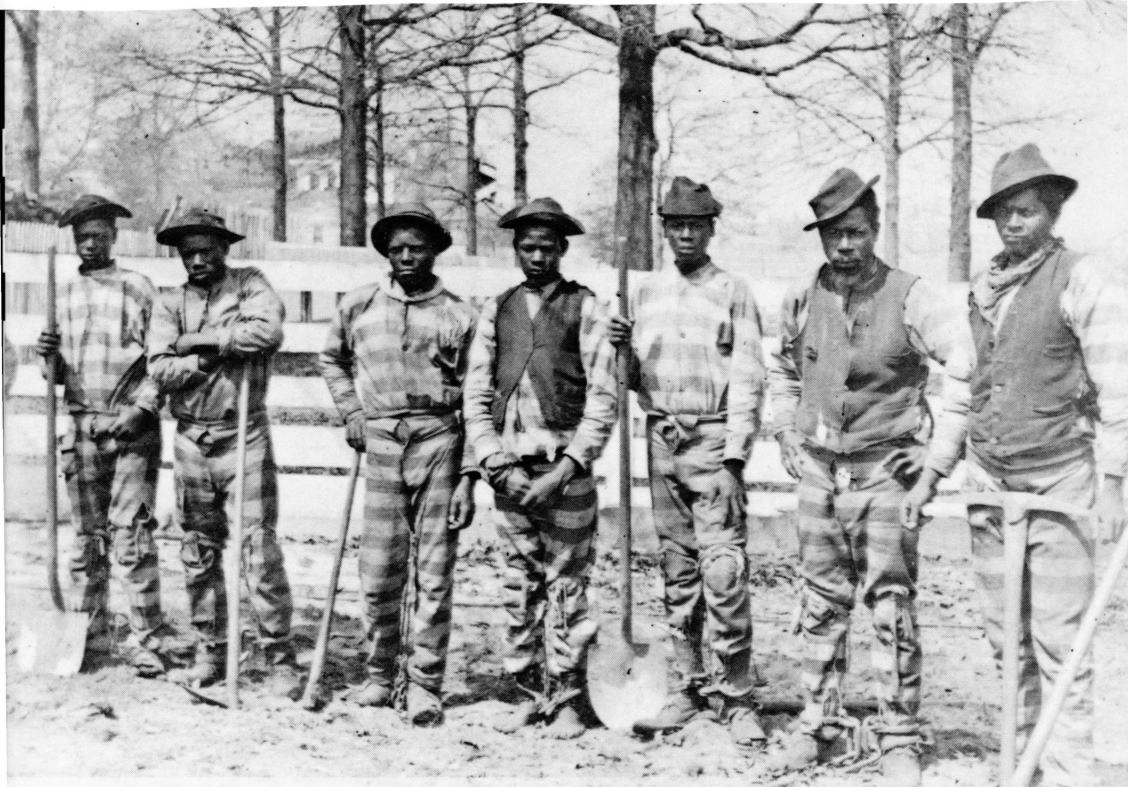


# Georgia Nigger

by

John L. Spivak

first published in 1932



*"The most devastating exposé of the treatment of Negroes  
in the Georgia chain gang that has ever been written."*

—Walter White, executive secretary, NAACP, 1931–1955



Frontispiece from the 1932 edition of *Georgia Nigger*.

GEORGIA NIGGER

TO MABEL

## PREFACE

To have placed the scene of action of "Georgia Nigger" in some specific county would manifestly have been unfair since it would have singled it out for national opprobrium when it is no worse than many others in the state or in other southern states; and to have presented a collection of factual, individual cases would have centered attention upon them and have left the many thousands of others as unknown as before.

Excellent studies in this field have been published by sociologists and penologists but these are too little known. I thought it wise to tell the story of David's efforts to escape from a monstrous system, in the guise of fiction. But though all characters in *Georgia Nigger* are fictitious some of the scenes described are so utterly incredible that I feel an appendix of pictures and documents are necessary in this particular work. The pictures I took personally in various camps and the documents are but a few of the many gathering dust in the State Capitol in Atlanta.

Georgia does not stand alone as a state lost to fundamental justice and humanity. It was chosen because it is fairly representative of the Carolinas, Florida, Alabama—the whole far-flung Black Belt. Nor is the whole south as pictured here. There are many counties where conditions are infinitely better, and too many counties where they are infinitely worse.

I do not believe that the overwhelming proportion of intelligent and humane citizens of the south approves these conditions. In those representative southerners, white and black, with whom I discussed my investigations and showed the pictures and documents, I found a sense of startled horror and a desire to end these things.

To those who are vaguely familiar with the lives in *Georgia Nigger* from the shocking cases which reach the press from time to time, and who may think I deliberately chose sensational and extreme instances for David to see and hear and pass through, I make assurances that I have earnestly avoided that, not only because it would not have been a representative picture but because the extreme cases are unbelievable.

To those, colored and white, who helped me with introductions which opened the doors of planter and cropper, peon and convict camp stockade, much gratitude is due.

J. L. S.

This preface was titled "Postscript" in the original edition.

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## I

**T**WO lanterns hung from the wooden cross driven deep in the red soil of the convict camp stockade. They threw a pale, yellow light over the ground and the steel cage on wheels so like a huge circus wagon in which ferocious beasts of the jungle are penned. The guard, staring absently at the sky, sat in an old chair tilted against the mess hall shack.

It is difficult to sleep when it is your last night on the chain gang and David peered through the latticed iron bars at the cross with its smoking lamps. There were thirteen men in the cage with him—nine negroes and five whites—sprawled on thin mattresses covering the iron bunks ranging the length of the cage on either side in three three-decker tiers. The six nearest the solid steel door were reserved

for whites. The fourteen men were naked to the waist. Their exposed bodies shone with sweat even in the semi-darkness.

"You kin take a bath in de ribber tomorrow," a voice from an adjoining bunk whispered enviously.

David did not answer. To bathe in a river, and a haunting devil always with him—that was Caleb's life. The toothless old convict, with a skin dried and withered by Georgia suns, had long since lost what little wit he had been born with and now spent his waking hours arguing with evil spirits and reliving the day when he had bathed in a river.

A mosquito lit on the boy's neck and he slapped at it casually. Flies hummed in the cage. Flies and mosquitoes were always entering through holes in the screen covering the bars and buzzing desperately to get out again. They were worse than the vermin you scratched at incessantly.

The guard, too, slapped at his ankles and arms and face. Somehow it helped you when you could not sleep, to know that the flies and mosquitoes annoyed him, too.

The mountainous mass of Sam Gates stretched on the bunk across the narrow aisle

from David turned slowly at the whisper and spat through cracked and swollen lips.

"You work out dis mawnin'," he said with difficulty, raising himself on an elbow.

"Yes, suh," the boy whispered.

"I wish I wukked out," Caleb announced eagerly.

The huge negro moved restlessly. His legs hurt. A steel spike resembling an ordinary pick extended ten inches in front and behind each ankle. The twenty-pound weight had rubbed against his feet until one leg had become infected. Shackle poison convicts called it. He had asked for a doctor and the guard's fist had crashed against his mouth. That had been yesterday and he had not complained again though the throbbing pain made it hard to work and impossible to sleep.

Everyone was afraid of this strapping prisoner doing life for murder. Sam Gates had killed a man on the farm where he had worked—broke the man's neck with his two hands. From the day two months ago when, chained hand and foot, he had been delivered to the Ochlockonee county camp at Snake Fork, he had terrified them. In his sullen eyes and powerful body was the tremendous,

quiet power of the primitive savage. Sam Gates was a killer. Even the guards who tried to break him and failed only hated and feared him the more.

“How long you did, boy?” he asked.

“Six months.”

“Six months! Dat ain’ nothin’. I bin in camps fo’ five year an’ I got a lot mo’ tuh do befo’ dey takes dese offen me.”

He raised the swollen foot in explanation and let it down easily on the torn mattress.

“Yes, suh,” said David respectfully.

“Five year,” Sam repeated. “Five year, an’ a lot mo’ tuh do—onless I kills dat boss-man an’ die out.”

A prisoner, scratching himself drowsily, raised his head.

“Gittin’ up,” he called.

The sleeping men tossed restlessly, disturbed by the cry.

“Git up,” the guard shouted.

The convict’s bare feet thudded on the floor. The sharp clang of iron against iron drowned the hum of the insects as the chains riveted around his ankles struck the rim of his bunk.

He stumbled to a stool covered with wet newspapers.

Under it was a zinc tub and the smell of its contents drew flies and mosquitoes nightly to feed in it. In the stifling heat the stench mingled with the stagnant odor of the nearby swamps and hung heavy over the cage. Sometimes a breath of hot wind shifted the pall rising from the tub. Then, for a beneficent moment, the air was filled with the south that was not of a convict camp and the prisoners breathed the sweet scent of rose and jasmine and rich magnolia growing luxuriously in the warden's yard.

"Gittin' back," called the convict standing motionless beside the stool.

"Git back," returned the guard.

The lean, leathery face of the man watching them was distinct in the light from the cross. The sleeves of his blue denim shirt were rolled to the elbows and the collar was open at the throat.

This was Charlie Counts' fourth year as guard. As illiterate as his parents he had grown up in the county like a weed in rich soil. Before his seventh birthday he had tasted the back-breaking toil of picking cotton under a broiling sun. As far back as he could remember he had always worked hard from

dawn to dark. Somewhere in the years before he reached manhood he learned to write his name in a laborious scrawl.

There is little to be earned guarding the chained creatures who lay Georgia's roads but carrying a shotgun and leaning lazily against a shady tree is easier than sweating in the fields or breathing dust in a cotton gin, so Charlie Counts became a guard.

During his hours on duty he was lord and master. And though even poverty stricken Crackers look down upon a guard, the sense of power in having men under him soothed the harassing struggle to house and feed and clothe a wife and brood of ragged children on the dollar and twenty-five cents a day the county paid him.

To David Charlie Counts had not been harsh. The boy was a misdemeanor convict, born and raised in Ochlockonee county. Even the chains of captivity had been spared him during the past months. And now, within a few hours, he would be away from the clank of chains and the stink of the cage. He would be a freed man again.

There was work to be done at home. With these cloudless skies and tropic sun it would

be an early season. The speckled bolls of cotton were cracking open and dotting the fields with heads as white as his mother's counterpane; cotton to be picked under a friendly sky, with the black, shiny faces of his mother and father near and the dry drone of field insects for music while he and Henrietta followed the furrows and stuffed the sacks hanging from their shoulders. Henrietta would be joyous at her brother's return and little Zebulon, scampering barefooted in patched overalls, would do a jig in sheer delight.

David wondered as he had wondered so often in the long months on the chain gang whether it had been wise to reject Mr. Jim Deering's offer to pay the twenty-five dollar fine as an advance on a thirty-dollar a month job on the Deering plantation. There were ugly rumors about the white man. Those for whom he advanced fines somehow never quite succeeded in working them off. Sometimes they were never heard of again after they went to work for him.

It was Mr. Jim Deering whenever the boy thought of him. Mr. Jim Deering was a power, an important figure in county politics,

a wealthy man with three or four thousand acres of cotton and corn, pecan groves and peanut farms. He was a director in the Southern Cotton Bank where the whites kept their money, and lived in a big house in a remote end of Ochlockonee county.

But the boy's father had advised against the planter's offer.

"I ain' specially keen 'bout hit," he had said. "Dey's bringin' yo' up tuh-morrer 'n' de co't o' ginral ju'sdiction ain' s'posed tuh set fo' t'ree months yet."

To the old man wise in the ways of the white man's south the haste was an ominous sign. He had heard of other negroes whom Mr. Deering had befriended. There were said to be men working for him whose fines he had advanced years ago, men never seen even on a Saturday evening in town. Mr. Deering always said the eighteen miles to the county seat at Live Oak was too long for the tired help.

A few of the planter's trusted men did come to town once in a while. He brought them in his Ford and when these found a bottle of white mule they sometimes whispered tales black men do not repeat too often even among themselves.

In that magic hour before the dawn when the heat of the night glides into the grateful coolness that follows fever, the fourteen caged men breathe more easily. Some turn restlessly and when you turn the sweat from your half naked body leaves a damp clot on the torn mattress. A rooster wandering from the warden's yard crows lustily. When you cannot sleep you hear him each morning. It presages your awakening.

The vast hulk of Sam Gates stirs. He bends his head over the edge of the bunk and spits through his cracked lips upon the floor.

Charlie Counts had called the cook and his helper from the dark shack in a corner of the stockade where the trusties slept. The weather-beaten clapboards that formed the kitchen were illuminated by a lamp suspended from a beam in the center. You could see them moving about, preparing breakfast for the convict crew, their shadows flying across the dusty window panes like gigantic bats.

With creaks that shrieked their message the rusty iron door of the cage turned on its hinges.

"Come an' git it!" the guard called loudly.

Dark shadows drop to the two-foot space between the tiers of bunks. Chains strike the iron floor with loud clanks and scrape over it with harsh rasps. In the half darkness they bump into each other and curse in undertones.

“Fo’ Christ’s sake!” a convict exclaims as his bare feet step into a puddle of spit.

“Watch yo’ step!” another cries as a steel spike stabs his leg.

And above the noise Charlie Counts’ voice rises louder:

“Come an’ git it! Come an’ git it! Reck’n you got all day!”

Grumbling sullenly the half naked men stumble down the four worn, wooden steps of the cage and pause on the cool, hard clay to scratch and pull on their striped coats. Some put on shoes through which their toes protrude.

A well three hundred yards from the barbed wire fence supplies water to the camp but the trusties are too busy preparing and serving breakfast to trouble about water for convicts. And when you sweat in a stinking cesspool all night you are too tired to pump water to wash your face and hands even if you are given per-

mission to go for it yourself. It does not matter anyway. You soon forget that you want to be clean when you dig dirt all day and sleep in it all night.

The dingy mess hall is lit by another kerosene lamp hanging from a beam and its yellow light glints off the six greasy, wooden benches at the greasier tables on each side of the hall. The place reeks with the hot smell of soap and coffee. A swarm of flies buzz angrily. They rise from tables and benches, from the floor and the walls and the ceiling. They circle about noisily and strike against you in their efforts to reach the open door.

White convicts sit at the tables to the left and the blacks at the right.

There is little talk. You gulp the unsavory coffee from a tin cup and with a tin spoon scoop mouthfuls of flour gravy, bits of salt pork and grits that is your portion before being led to the day's work.

The guard leans easily against the wooden cross, watching you.

Convicts finished their breakfast and left the mess hall, waiting for the truck that would take them to work. Caleb followed David out of the hall, stuffing a mouthful of the chewing

tobacco the county rations each prisoner every week.

“Doan you come back yere, David,” he grinned cheerfully.

The boy smiled.

“Doan you come back yere,” the old man repeated earnestly, spitting a mouthful of tobacco juice.

“I’ll sho try not tuh,” David said simply.

“You won’ jes’ ez long ez you won’ let de debbil git inter you ’n’ ruination yo’ soul lak he done did wid me.”

Sam Gates approached, walking awkwardly, his shoulders hunched as though to ward a blow.

On the day a convict goes home those who remain crowd about to wish him well and the guard watched tolerantly the small group gathering about David.

“Yes, suh, Caleb,” Sam Gates said good-naturedly, “I reck’n David kin git hisse’f a bath in a ribber now.”

The old man’s shoulders drooped.

“I had a bath in a ribber once,” he began eagerly, scratching himself in excitement. “We wuz wukkin’ a road down near de Flint an’ de road, he tu’ned right aroun’ f’um de

swamps an' run a-tween de ribber an' de swamps, an' it wuz hot. Yes, suh, dat wuz a hot day sho an' de boss-man, he says we kin bathe in de ribber ——”

“Hey, you—Caleb an' Wesley,” Charlie Counts interrupted. “Y'all'd better wash that pan.”

The two convicts carried the tub under the cage to the swamp beyond the stockade to dump the night's contents.

A white trusty lit two pine torches that sputtered and crackled. He gave one to the guard and holding the flares high they took their places at the stockade gate, their shadows wavering over the ground.

The headlights of the work truck appeared and with a great sound of brakes halted at the entrance. The driver and the day guard got out and sat on the running board.

“Cap'n up yet?” they asked.

“There he is comin' yonder,” Charlie Counts said.

Ray Alton moved loosely across the wide lawn separating his rambling house from the stockade. Tall and thin he seemed to be a bony framework covered by wrinkled trousers and a soiled, white shirt open at the throat.

“Line up!” the guards called.

The convicts formed an irregular line.

“Come by me!” the warden ordered sharply.

Each convict called his name as he passed through the gate and clambered on the truck. When the boy’s turn came he called:

“David Jackson.”

“You work out this mawnin’, eh, Dave?” Alton asked good-naturedly.

“Yes, suh, Cap’n,” he replied eagerly.

“Step out.”

“Keep yo’ eyes open fo’ de debbil doan git in you,” Caleb admonished as he passed.

“Oh, he’ll be a good nigger now, Caleb,” the warden smiled. “The devil ain’t specially keen on him I reck’n, eh, Dave?”

The loaded truck thundered down the road. The flares were extinguished.

“Well, it’s yore day, ain’t it, Dave?” Alton remarked pleasantly.

“Yes, suh, Cap’n.” The boy’s white teeth could be seen in the expansive smile.

“Didn’t have much o’ clothes when you come here, did you?” The warden stared at David’s unchained feet and the striped convict suit. “But you’ll git some now.”

The eight dollar outfit the state insists the county give you when your time is up was brought from the commissary: a pair of brogans two sizes too large, overalls, a jacket and a cap. It is supposed to have cost eight dollars but you could buy it in any town store for much less.

The boy stripped the convict suit and donned the county's gift. The light from the lanterns on the cross grew sickly. The deep purple of the southern sky turned wan in the east. The lamps were removed from the rusty nails and extinguished. The cross was bare and forlorn in the cold, morning light.

The warden brought his Ford from the blacksmith's barn.

"I'll take you home myself," he announced as he pulled up at the gate. "I have to go to town anyway."

He opened the door of the battered old car.

"Get in, boy," he invited. "You're a freed man now."

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## II

SEVEN miles from Snake Fork lay Shay Pearson's sixteen hundred acres. Here, was the first of the sagging shacks where his croppers lived, a rude and dilapidated structure blistered by summer heat and swept by years of wind and rain; and there, behind the luxuriant branches of those towering live oaks, peeked the dark, unpainted boards of another cabin, with the morning sun on its roof. In the fields deep in rich rows of cotton, croppers worked their one-horse farms apportioned in return for half their products, stuffing the fruit of their year's labor into sacks hanging from their shoulders.

Half way across his sprawling lands was the planter's home, an oasis of opulence in a world of ruined and decaying clapboards. Forty

thousand dollars that house cost and it compared with Jim Deering's, lost in his acreage at the other end of the county. Few ever saw the Deering mansion but Shay built his facing the main road so that anyone could see what a Cracker can do when he has ambition.

"I knew Mr. Pearson when he didn't even have a pair o' shoes for the winter," said the warden.

"Yes, suh," said David.

The Jacksons were Pearson niggers and David knew the story of the white man's rise. From the hopeless background of poor trash parents scraping a precarious subsistence from a two-horse farm he had become the second largest planter in Ochlockonee county. When his parents died and his brothers deserted the place for the city's opportunities, he was left alone to squeeze a living from the soil. He began with Isaiah Cleveland who owned an adjoining thirty-acre tract. Old Isaiah was a nigger so the aggressive young Cracker ploughed twenty feet over the balk into his neighbor's land. In three years Shay had so encroached on the property that Cleveland went to law about it only to learn that his title was questionable and that he owed his attorney

one hundred and fifty dollars. The lawyer accepted a note secured by the property for the debt and Pearson bought it with money borrowed from the Southern Cotton Bank. In the fullness of time, after a season of rain and another of cheap cotton, old Isaiah's farm was knocked down to the white planter who permitted him and his family to work their old land as croppers. By loans and similar transactions Shay had acquired farm after farm and now ruled his lands and the thirty-two families on them, like a medieval lord.

A sow and two pigs wandered out of a side road and stood rooting in a ditch by the highway. A flock of buzzards, feeding on the carcass of a pig killed by a passing motorist, took wing at the car's approach and swarmed to the dead limbs of a tree to eye them owlshly.

"Won't be much left o' that there pig by the time I gits back," the warden commented amiably.

"No, suh. Reck'n not," the boy agreed, glancing back to the buzzards returning to the feast.

"I ain't never seed such smellers as them buzzards have. I once saw a pig run down like that there one was an' there wasn't a buz-

zard around an' a couple o' hours later when I passed by, them bones was picked clean. Picked clean they was."

He paused and added thoughtfully:

"Them buzzards has sho got wonderful smellers."

At a turn in the road David saw the familiar live oak rising before his home like a lonely sentinel, its wide-spread branches shading the roof of the rickety porch. The cabin rested on three brick stilts and an upright log of hickory.

"Well, I reck'n here's where you git out," the warden smiled. He pulled up at the deep wagon ruts of the narrow path lined with broom weeds that led to the house. "Good luck now, an' don't you go to gittin' into no mo' trouble!"

His parents and sister were probably at the far end of the field for only Zebulon, not yet old enough to work, was visible. The five-year-old boy was trying to ride a pig and at David's loud shout, fell off with excited squeals of glee.

There was an air of peace and tranquillity here: the sun on the white rows, that butterfly dipping over the heavy stalks, the noises of the field—even the pig grunting under the house

added to the restfulness. That pig always rooted there, right under that crack in the floor where water from the drinking bucket dripped to the cool ground underneath. Bright red geraniums in rusty tin cans and broken earthenware ranged the porch and gave the drab boards an air of cheerfulness and color. The three rooms were spotless. The large cooking stove, with its pots and pans scrubbed shiny, was in the kitchen as when he had left. Nothing seemed changed and there was comfort in that knowledge.

He found a large cake of soap, a towel and a pair of old overalls. Zebulon watched curiously while he poured water into the large zinc tub his mother used for washing clothes.

“Gottuh git rid o’ de lice an’ crabs,” David explained cheerfully. “You wouldn’t want ’em crawlin’ all over you, would you now?”

“No, suh!” the boy exclaimed with certainty. “Louise’d jes’ smack hell outer me if I done got lousy!”

When the new clothes were left soaking in lye water to rid them of any vermin he might have brought from Snake Fork and his own body washed, David swung a cotton sack over a shoulder and with his little brother chatter-

ing at his side, went to the fields. He was needed there, and besides, Shay Pearson's overseer knew that he would be a freed man this day and the planter would be angry if Dee Jackson did not put his boy to work immediately when there was such a big early crop. Dee's monthly credit of twelve dollars included David's needs, and the boy was considered as much a Pearson nigger as his father.

Henrietta, a spindly-legged but comely girl of fourteen, dropped her half-filled bag and rushed to greet him. His mother, her hands pressing against the small of her back, straightened up and beamed happily. Dee stretched his long, angular form and carefully depositing his sack on the ground, smiled broadly. His mother hugged the boy, the tears filling her eyes.

"Here, here, Son!" his father protested affectionately. "You leab Louise alone!"

"Git away, you fool nigger!" she chided, pressing the boy closer. "Son, I'm sho happy you is back!"

"Blessin's on de Lawd," said Dee reverently.

They plucked the fluffy cotton from the wide-open bolls, Henrietta following a furrow

beside her brother, laughing or exclaiming sympathetically at his stories of the chain gang. Zebulon scampered about, indifferent to the burning soil under his bare feet. Field insects hummed their dry songs and the heat waves quivered over the baking rows.

The gangling form of Shay Pearson's overseer, his long legs draped about a mule, came towards them.

"See you're back, Dave," the white man smiled pleasantly.

"Yes, suh. Jes' in time fo' work."

"Yeah. I reck'n Dee needs a li'l he'p. I'll tell Mr. Pearson you're back."

Dee approached hastily, wiping the sweat from his face with a sleeve.

"Sho glad tuh hab'm back," he said. "Fine picker, dat boy."

"Yeah. Good nigger," the overseer agreed, squirting a mouthful of tobacco juice.

With a careless nod he continued on to the next farm, his round shoulders drooping listlessly.

Dee Jackson could never see a mule without sad memories, for upon a mule and the

good Lord he had based a lifelong hope, had ploughed singing to a vision of freedom, and both had failed him. For years he had saved for that mule and a plough. With these and a little seed it was possible to rent a tract of ground and pay the owner one-fourth of the crop for the use of his land, and with a season or two of good crops and high prices, there would be money enough to make a down payment on a few acres. There were niggers in Ochlockonee county who had gone from tenant farming to independence.

The day he put his mark to an agreement with Shay Pearson for the use of twenty acres, and the mule and second-hand plough were paid for, was one of rejoicing. The mule was not as young and healthy as Dee would have liked but he was the best they could afford. Louise patched their clothes by the kerosene lamp and they did with little store food that winter for so much depended upon finishing the season clear of debt.

Those were feverish days at planting time when the winter vanished in the mellow warmth of spring. When perfect stands of cotton made the long rows a vivid green, Dee ploughed the middles again to make the beds

soft and with anxious care they thinned the luxuriant growths with appraising eyes. Then the blossoms appeared, flowering like good omens. The green bolls speckled, and under the burning July sun, cracked open with the smiling promise of money for their own farm. There would be almost a bale to the acre they told themselves happily.

But on the very day they went out for the first picking, it rained.

Fleecy clouds appeared in a suddenly overcast sky. Dee's face grew haggard and he clasped his hands together as in prayer. Louise looked up with a frightened air as though seeking help from the angry heavens. No one moved. And then it rained.

It seemed to them that the rain beat the fields with furious gusts of hate. Dee sank to the furrow as though the rain hammering his cotton to the ground had hammered him down, too.

And as suddenly as it had begun, the sky cleared and the sun shone hot again.

He did not stir. Louise touched him gently.

"Git up offen dat groun', Dee," she urged.  
"Ain' no sense carryin' on dat way."

"Oh, my good Lawd," he said dazedly.

The cotton had been whipped to the ground or hung dejectedly, their whiteness stained brown from the wet leaves. The crop was ruined. They would be lucky to get a third of what it would have brought.

“Dey’ll be mo’ pickin’s,” Louise said encouragingly.

There was only one consolation: the Lord who gave him his children, a helpful wife and the strength to work must have had a good reason to do that to him. Maybe he had been so busy ploughing and chopping and dreaming that the Lord thought he was becoming too independent and took that way to remind him that He was a jealous God, or perhaps some sin long since forgot was charged against him and He had demanded a settlement. The Lord kept mighty careful accounts.

Then, in the bleak winter days, the mule became sick.

Dee slept in the barn to attend his slightest need, but nothing seemed to help. That late December night when he returned to the cabin where the lamp with its smoking chimney threw his shadow across the room, his face told the story. Louise was waiting, wrapped in a blanket and huddled in the old rocker near the

stove. Twice she had been to the barn but when the mule stretched out, breathing in those painful, asthmatic gasps, Dee had sent her away.

“De Lawd knows His business,” she said bravely.

“Yeah.” He clasped and unclasped his hands, cracking the knuckles of his bony fingers.

“Sho He knows whut He’s doin’.” Her thick lips quivered. “He done gib you de money fo’ tuh buy ’im an’ now He takes ’im away.”

The chair creaked over the loose boards in the floor.

“Sho. Lak chillun hit is. He done gib us seben an’ tuk fo’.”

“Dey didn’t hab much tuh eat; dat’s why dey tuk sick an’ died,” he said resentfully.

“Talkin’ dat way ain’ gontuh do you no good.”

“You kin allus git chillun. But whey kin a nigger git a mule w’en he ain’ got no money?”

Louise slid from the rocker to her knees.

“I ain’ questionin’ You none, Lawd,” she prayed, “but did You hab tuh do dis tuh us? Ain’ we done eb’ryt’ing You wants done?”

An' now You frows us down lak dis. Caise maybe we didn't gib no money tuh de chu'ch. But Lawd, You knows we didn't hab no money."

Neighbors came with sympathy. Carts creaked to the Jackson cabin on the chilly evenings and tired blacks from surrounding farms sat before the fireplace and comforted them. Old Isaac Burr, who had ministered to the spiritual wants of Pearson niggers for a decade, came on Christmas night and told the story again of the Son of God Who came to spread the gospel of love and forgiveness; and as he talked a desperate hope awoke in Dee's breast.

"You reck'n de Lawd's too busy right now?" he asked earnestly.

"He's allus got plenty on His han's but His ears is wide open fo' anything His chillun ses tuh Him any time, anywhey in de hul worl'."

"Den lissen, Lawd!" Dee shouted, rising to his feet. "I ain' neber asked You fo' much but I'm askin' You now: gib me dat mule jes' fo' one mo' season, an' I'll neber ask You fo' nothin' no mo' in dis worl'. Neber. Sen' a clap o' Yo' thunder an' raise him f'um de daid.

You kin wuk all kinds o' miracles, Suh, an' dis is de las' chance I got. Lawd, doan You see dat I'll hab tuh go tuh Mist' Pearson if You doan gib me dat ol' mule back again? "

"Dey's a lot o' cullud folks wukkin' fo' Mist' Pearson," the preacher said mildly. "De Lawd knows His business an' if He wants you tuh be a croppah den He's got His own good reasons fo' hit. You kin bet on dat."

Dee took the lamp in a trembling hand and with old Isaac went to the mound back of the barn, hopeful that on this night of all nights, the miracle would happen: in a blinding flame of fire and a deafening clap of thunder the earth would be rent asunder and the mule would struggle to his feet ready for supper.

But there was no flame of fire nor clap of thunder. Only the lantern light and their shadows on the motionless mound, and a wind whistling.

Dee's head bowed.

"I reck'n dat settles hit, Lawd," he said dejectedly.

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On the second day of the new year Dee got

off a neighbor's cart in Live Oak and went hesitantly to the Southern Cotton Bank, the red brick, one-story building across the square from the county court house and jail, and asked for Mr. Albert Graham, the president.

"Coming to deposit your savings, Dee?" the official greeted him jocularly.

"No, suh," he said nervously. "I done come tuh see you 'bout a li'l business matter."

"Sure. Always glad to talk business with you, Dee. Come right in and set yourself down."

"I'd lak tuh len' 'bout two hunnerd dollars, Mist' Graham," the old man stammered.

"That could be arranged, but have you any collateral?"

Dee looked puzzled.

"Something that will make sure the bank is repaid," Graham explained.

"Sho I'll pay hit back."

"I must have something as valuable in return," the banker said kindly. "Land—or a house——"

"But I ain' got no lan'," Dee said helplessly, spreading his hands in a gesture of emptiness.

"You see, Dee," Graham pointed out regretfully, "we all know you and we know that

if you have the money you will repay a loan. But now, suppose your crop is bad for a season or two—why, you'll hardly be able to pay the interest let alone the principal. Don't you see? And the bank must protect its depositors."

The Jacksons had been Ramsey niggers before the Civil War and Dee, depressed by the inevitableness of a cropper's contract, turned to Bayard Washington Ramsey as the last hope. The aristocratic white was known for his kindness, especially to descendants of his father's slaves. He lived a mile south of Live Oak in the mansion his father built before the lanky northern lawyer ruined the family's hundred and sixty thousand dollar investment in niggers, and too proud to enrich himself by Cracker tricks in dealing with blacks, had never increased the two hundred acre plantation left when the war ended and all creditors were paid.

The cook greeted Dee shrilly at the kitchen door of the Ramsey home.

"If hit ain' ol' Dee hisse'f! Whut you doin' heah?"

"I come tuh see Mist' Ramsey," he said with a worried air.

"Whut fo'?"

" I got tuh see 'im."

" Well, you jes' set right down heah an' I'll go tell 'im."

When she returned she said, " Mist' Ramsey'll see you on de front po'ch. You go roun' dey."

The tall, white-haired planter looked at him questioningly.

" You're a long way from home, Dee," he smiled. " What is it? "

" Mist' Ramsey, suh," the old man began, twisting his hat nervously, " you 'bout de only white man here'bouts we kin come to w'en we is in trouble."

Ramsey looked gravely at him.

" An' I got mo'n a wagon load o' trouble now."

" Yes, Dee."

" Mist' Ramsey, suh ——" The nervous twisting of his hat became more pronounced. " My mule done laid down an' died, suh."

The white man nodded sympathetically.

" I bin a hard wukkin' nigger all my bo'n days," Dee continued, " an' I'm willin' tuh wuk de res' o' my days some mo' but I ain' got nothin' tuh wuk wid. No mule. No food. I ain' got nothin'."

Ramsey pursed his lips and stared at his fields naked in the winter's day.

"I jes' was ober tuh de bank fo' tuh ask 'em tuh len' me two hunnerd dollars so's I kin git me a mule an' a li'l food tuh tide us ober till de nex' crop comes but Mist' Graham done said I'd hab tuh hab col—col ——"

"Collateral," Ramsey said quietly.

"Yes, suh. Collateral. But I ain' got no collateral. I ain' got nothin' ceptin' my two han's, an' my wife, an' David an' Henrietta."

"Yes, I know."

"An' I'll hab tuh sign wid Mist' Pearson if I cain' git no two hunnerd dollars an' if I goes tuh wuk fo' Mist' Pearson ——"

"Yes, I know," Ramsey repeated.

"So I done come tuh you, suh," Dee burst forth pleadingly. "I doan want tuh be Mist' Pearson's nigger. Me, an' Louise an' David an' Henrietta, we'll wuk fo' you 'n' pay you back, suh, if you'll len' hit tuh me."

Ramsey shook his head slowly.

"I can't, Dee. I'd like to help you but I haven't money enough to start saving all the nigras in the county. I have to take care of my own nigras. If I loan you two hundred dollars and another two hundred to some other

nigra caught in the Cracker buzz saw I should soon be in the same situation you are in."

Perspiration broke out in tiny beads on Dee's forehead.

"Yes, suh," he said. "Thankee, suh."

"You see, Dee," Ramsey added, putting a hand gently on the old man's shoulders, "I'm caught in their buzz saw, too."

"Yes, suh," said Dee.

#### 4

Dee would have left the county but there was no place to go. There was not even a mule to pull the few sticks of furniture that were his household goods, nor food for a journey, and no matter where a penniless nigger went he would have to work for someone. In Ochlockonee county they knew him for a good nigger and would be more considerate than would strange whites in another county or another state, so two days later Dee Jackson put his cross to the usual cropper contract.

It provided that Pearson supply him with a mule, seed, and a monthly advance of twelve dollars between February and August inclusive, in return for half his crop after all advances and interest thereon were deducted.

The agreement particularly specified that should the "*said tenant fail to pay the advances made by the owner when due, the tenant agrees to surrender the possession of said premises, in which event the owner is hereby authorized to sell or dispose of all property thereon the tenant has any interest in*" and concluded with the ominous words "*and shall be so construed between the parties thereto, any law, usage or custom to the contrary notwithstanding.*"

Dee could not read but he knew what it contained. Others had signed cropper agreements and were charged eighteen percent interest on advances, and with the Pearson bookkeeping system, a nigger never got out of debt. And Dee knew also that the Georgia law provided that as long as he owed the planter one dollar he could not leave the Pearson farm without facing arrest and the chain gang for swindling.

So Dee Jackson became Shay Pearson's nigger.

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### III

SEVEN hundred and eighty pounds the Jacksons weighed in before the sun set behind the pines. Louise led the way home, her feet dragging along a furrow. Even the empty sack hanging from her shoulder seemed limp and exhausted.

David scratched himself tiredly. His mother turned at the sound.

"Didn't you scrub yo'se'f, Son?" she demanded. "You ain' gone an' brung no lice home, did you?"

"Sho I scrubbed myse'f. Scrubbed myse'f good. Dis scratchin's jes' a nachral habit, I reck'n."

"Better not bring no camp lice intuh my home," she said severely. "I got all I kin do tuh keep hit clean as 'tis. If dat house gits

lousy I'll mek you scrub hit f'um top tuh bottom, Lawd mek me stumble an' fall in sin if I doan!"

The southern night and the stillness around the cabin lost in the twenty acres, the kerosene lamp and its cheery light, the cream-colored dishes and heavy cups on the red-and-white, checkered table-cloth gave David a sense of peace and security. And in Dee and Louise was a deep thankfulness that the Lord had returned them their son.

After supper Zebulon was put to bed and the women washed the dishes in a large, tin pan while Dee and his son sat on the porch steps and smoked their corn-cob pipes.

"I hears dey's payin' a dollar an' a half a day in de cotton mills," Dee said slowly.

"Yeah. How you figger'n gittin' dey?"

"I got fo' dollars an' sixty cents. Made hit shootin' crap once in town," he added apologetically.

David did not answer.

"I started wid a quarter," Dee explained with a touch of pride, and then hastily, "but dat was a sin an' I ain' sinned sence. I ain' eben spent hit cause I got hit gambelin' but I figgered maybe some time I'd git a chance tuh

spend hit on somethin' de Lawd wouldn't mind."

"Yeah? On whut?"

"Well, I figgered maybe you'd lak tuh git outuh de county an' go tuh wuk in a mill town."

The boy peered at him suspiciously.

"Whut you want tuh git rid o' me fo'?" he asked. "Ain' you wantin' me roun' here no mo'?"

"Sho I want you roun' here, Son, but I figgered maybe dis county ain' no place fo' a young nigger. I b'longs tuh Mist' Shay an' fo' I knows hit Mist' Shay'll gib you twenty acres an' you'll b'long tuh him, too."

"Got tuh be somebody's nigger. An' Mist' Shay's as good as a lot o' dem an' maybe some better. If I takes yo' fo' dollars an' sixty cents some deputy'll pick me up fo' I gits outen de nex' county an' take my money away an' den sen' me tuh de chain gang fo' bein' a vagrant."

"I figgered maybe you could git tuh a mill town if you pays de bus fare," his father said hesitantly.

"Yeah. Dey was two niggers in camp who tried hit an' dey had mo'n fo' dollars. Dey was headin' fo' New Orleans an' dey headed

right smack intuh de chain gang on de way. You cain' go no place now—not wid all dem fiel's an' ev'rybody wantin' husky niggers tuh pick'm."

"I figgered maybe you could do hit, Son," Dee said quietly.

"If I stays here an' minds my own bus'ness dey ain' nobody goin' tuh trouble me. I ain' fixin' tuh git uppity roun' here. I'll jes' mind my own bus'ness an' ten' tuh my wuk right here wid you. Dis place's plenty good fo' me."

"Hit's alright wid me, Son. I ain' schemin' tuh git rid o' you. I jes' figgered maybe you'd be a smart sight better off."

Louise and Henrietta joined them. The shaky boards creaked under Louise's weight.

"Gi' me some tuhbaccy," she said, striking the bowl of her pipe against her knee.

Dee gave her the can. She filled the bowl and struck a match.

"Dat trouble o' Preacher Isaac wid Mist' Shay's all patched up, I hears," she said with a pleased air. "Po' ol' man. He was jes' frettin' hisse'f sick Mist' Shay'd take his chu'ch away an' plant de groun' wid cotton."

“Yeah,” Dee said thoughtfully. “Dat’s whut he got messin’ roun’ wid things dat ain’ his bus’ness.”

2

Old Isaac Burr was a Pearson cropper who did his earthly work with eyes set heavenward and who lived for the hours when he preached God’s word to his flock. He had never learned to read or write but he had heard the Bible read so often that he knew many verses and these he used for texts. Pearson niggers met in his cabin until the planter gave them a plot of ground on which to build a church and each year, after the crop was baled, donated a coat of paint for the building. There was not a cropper on his lands who was not proud of the church and its tall spire. And then old Isaac told his congregation, casually, in the course of a sermon, that black children do not have as good a chance for an education as white ones. The listeners accepted it as a truism and paid no further attention to it but the planter, when he passed the Burr farm, summoned him. The old man came, bowing and smiling.

“Preacher,” Pearson began, “my niggers

roun' here are a pretty contented lot, ain't they?"

"Yas, suh," he smiled. "Dey sho is!"

The planter rubbed his chin reflectively.

"A preacher's job's to spread the gospel, ain't it? Every time I heard you, you talked fine."

"Thank you, suh. Thank you. I allus tries to gib 'em de Good Book's wuds de bes' I kin."

"That's jes' it. Why don't you jes' stick to your job an' git 'em in right with the Lord instead o', puttin' ideas into their heads that'll make trouble."

"Who? Me? Why, Mist' Pearson, I bin libin' here all my life an' I ain' bin one to make no trouble! Somebody's lyin' to you, suh."

"I was told you said something 'bout nigger children not gittin' as good a education as the whites."

The old man looked puzzled.

"I doan remember, suh," he said, "but maybe I did say dat. Lawd, Mist' Shay, dat ain' no lie. Eb'rybody knows hit."

"Yeah. Everybody knows it but there's no sense rubbin' it in. First thing you know all my niggers here'll start frettin' about it an'

askin' fo' a lot o' things the county can't afford. That would only git 'em in wrong. You wouldn't want nothin' like that to happen, would you now?"

"Lawd, no, suh!" the old man exclaimed, frightened. "Us niggers doan wan' no trouble!"

"Well, you probably didn't mean nothin' but remarks like that can start an awful lot o' misunderstandin'. Naturally, I figgered that if the church built on my land was used to start trouble amongst my niggers, well—nobody could expect me to give up valuable property to be used for that."

"No, suh," he agreed miserably.

"I reck'n it was jes' a accident an' it won't happen no mo'. I jes' figgered I'd mention it to you while I was passin' by."

"Yas, suh. I'se sho glad you did. I'll watch my wuds mo' keerful, suh."

### 3

"Niggers'll allus hab trouble," Dee said slowly, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," said Louise.

"White folks hab troubles, too," Dee said thoughtfully. "Eb'rybody's got trouble."

The unpainted wagon, with tufts of cotton clinging to cracks in the rough boards, joggled over the road to Preacher Isaac's church. Henrietta was gay with a yellow ribbon in her hair and Louise sat proud in her calico dress. But Dee, though dressed in his lone pair of black pants and blue, meeting-night shirt, was far from worldly thoughts. On this night he would sing and the Lord would hear him. There would be a clean feeling in his heart. He always felt like his spirit was washed clean after such an evening, clean as fresh cotton peeking through a cracking boll. There was comfort in knowing there is a God and a heaven beyond a world of cotton rows and nigger shacks.

A hen flapped its wings excitedly to escape the wagon.

They heard thunderous voices raised in song before they saw the church with its friendly, lighted windows. There was a primitive yearning in the sound, a communion with God and the promise of a future where there is no work nor worry but only rest, and good things to eat, and angels playing harps and singing praises of the Lord; where the saved could

peek through holes in heaven's golden floor and see sinners sizzling on huge pine logs or picking cotton under a Georgia sun forever and forever, without even a drink of water for their cracked lips.

Four lanterns, suspended by twisted strands of wire from beams in the ceiling, threw grotesque shadows of the fifteen niggers already there when the Jacksons entered. Door and windows were wide open but the church reeked of perspiration. Insects hurled themselves at the lights or settled on the unfeeling bodies of the congregation sitting on long, moveable benches. There were croppers in overalls and in store suits bought in opulent days, women in bright dresses and barefooted youngsters; and facing them from the raised platform was old Isaac with the white shirt reserved for prayer meetings glaring on his bosom. His preacher's coat fell below his knees and even by lantern light it seemed to show an age-old mossiness, but it was his insignia as the shepherd of a flock and he would as soon have appeared naked before them as without it.

“Come in! Come right in, Brother Jackson!” he shouted.

He sang:

*Sinnuh, whut you gonter do  
W'en de debbil git you?*

The congregation picked up the song:

*Whut you gonter do  
W'en de debbil git you!  
Whut you gonter do  
W'en de debbil git you!*

“Lawd, I’m on my way!” Dee replied lustily. The congregation roared:

*Lawd, I’m on my way!*

More Pearson niggers came. The loneliness of farms and the drabness of daily lives were forgotten. As the head of each family entered old Isaac shouted greetings between the intoned words of a spiritual. Sweating faces turned to him with abiding faith: an old man, his hands wrinkled by a life of toil, whose thick, flabby lips trembled as he sang; a barefooted old woman, her face marked by a century’s lines, leaned forward eagerly. Her thin, withered hands held a cold pipe. Stone

deaf, she did not hear a sound but her rheumy eyes were glued to the preacher.

Old Isaac was crying. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he wiped them with the palm of a hand.

“Yas, Lawd!” he cried. “Dey’s yo’ chillun—li’l black chillun!”

His white goatee quivered with emotion. The old, deaf woman nodded approvingly.

“Amen,” she murmured.

He raised clenched fists high overhead. He was like an ancient prophet come among them.

“Doan y’all go to figgerin’ dat all you gotter do is to start prayin’ an’ beggin’ de Lawd to fo’gib you an’ promisin’ Him to be good w’en y’all’s too ol’ to be bad. De Lawd ain’ nobody’s fool! He got His eyes wide open all de time an’ He’s watchin’ you—watchin’ you pusson’ly! You cain’ pull a pair o’ loaded dice on Him. No, suh! You try dat an’ y’all lose jes’ as sho’s my name’s Isaac Burr! Y’all lose an’ find yo’s’e’f sizzlin’ in hell an’ de debil right ober you laughin’ till his sides hu’t, an’ I sho won’t blame him none!

“One o’ dese days a angel tek a look down here an’ say to de Lawd, ‘Lawd, dose black

niggers down on de Pearson farm ain' payin' no 'tention a-tall to whut yo' preacher's tellin' 'em. All dey wants is to fill dey bellies an' buy some new clo'se an' shoot crap an' do a li'l fornicatin'. Lawd, doan You reck'n we better sen' a li'l fire an' brimstone an' git finished up wid 'em? Dey a bunch o' no good niggers anyhow—jes' sinnin' an' fornicatin' all de time!'

" But de Lawd's kind. Oh, my chillun, y'all doan know how kind He is, blessed be His name. He's got a heart bigger'n de hul' worl' an' He'll say, 'Oh, le's gib 'em one mo' chance. Dey ain' no use whippin' 'em now. My Son was crucified wid nails through His body jes' to sabe wuthless niggers lak dem. Sho, le's gib 'em one mo' chance!'

" He's allus gibbin' you one mo' chance—an' whut y'all doin' wid hit? "

His voice rose in a terrifying question. But the emotion was too great for him and his arms dropped to his sides with a helpless gesture.

" Oh, my po' chillun—whut y'all doin' wid yo' chance? " he asked brokenly.

A woman sobbed. An old man cried loudly, " Lawd, O Lawd, fo'gib a ol' nigger fo' his

sins!" Dee's head bowed. Louise wiped a tear from her perspiring face.

"Boy, dat's preachin'!" a voice shouted enthusiastically.

"Yes, suh!" another cried.

"Gib hit tuh 'em, Preacher!" an old woman shouted hysterically. "Lawd, you ain' tol' 'em de half ob hit yet!"

## 5

It was in the early hours of the morning before the singing and shouting ended. In Dee's heart was a serene peace. He felt that he was in right with the Lord. Henrietta was asleep, tired by the emotional strain. David stared moodily at the star-lit fields.

The wagon creaked through the ruts.

"I sho feels a lot better," said Dee.

"He preached fine dis eb'nin'," his wife said admiringly.

A great contentment was over them.

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## IV

THE county seat nestling in sleepy indolence on the hot Georgia plain for six days of the week awoke on Saturday afternoon. Wagons lumbered out of dusty, red highways, the mules and horses wet with perspiration. They were left on the outskirts of the town and in side streets while an invading horde of blacks swarmed to the center of the town: men with sleeves rolled up and collars open, women in their Sunday best, sweating profusely, chiding and smacking their offspring. Niggers within a ten mile radius were coming to town, some to buy necessities or exchange produce for clothes and flour, tobacco and kerosene; but most just to wander about aimlessly or rest in the shade of awnings over stores, glad to escape the loneliness of their farms. The town hall square, the street corners and the side-

walks were cluttered with them. There were seven or eight blacks to every white in Live Oak.

Dusty Fords and white farmers' wagons lined the paved square. Crackers in overalls, and their women in faded Mother Hubbards, rambled about as aimlessly as the blacks. Loud music blared from a radio store facing the county jail adjoining the town hall. A group collected before the loud speaker on the sidewalk. Two black children joined hands and hopped about joyously to the amusement of bystanders who laughed and clapped hands in tune with the dance.

The benches on the town hall lawn were occupied by whites. The blacks congregated on corners and in front of stores or sat on curbs puffing corn-cob pipes. Niggers did not walk on the lawn except to drink at the public pump from a tin dipper hanging under a sign "Colored." On the other side of the pump marked "White," ragged and barefooted white children splashed water over one another with loud shouts of glee.

As the sun set behind the one and two story buildings, bringing a measure of relief from the heat, a white man in a soiled shirt and

wrinkled trousers, issued from a side street, his arms loaded with hymn books and a Bible. His fat jowls and protruding belly swayed with each step. The paunch almost hid a heavy, gold watch chain hanging from his belt. As he advanced upon the lawn a number of middle-aged and old men and women rose. His red face was damp with perspiration and he wiped it with a sleeve, smiled greetings, and distributed the hymn books.

The elders dragged little boys with pinched faces and barefooted little girls with long, thin hair drooping to their shoulders, to join in a semicircle under a stately live oak. There was meekness in the children's eyes and the grave expression of serious old age.

A crowd of whites gathered near the pump while the blacks watched from across the wide street.

The fat man waved the Bible.

"We will open with the hymn *Hold Out to the End*," he announced loudly. His voice was husky.

*I bin prayin' in the valley so long,  
I ain't got tard yet.  
I bin prayin' in the valley so long,  
I ain't got tard yet.*

He kept time by waving the Bible. The veins in his neck showed blue against his red throat. The singing suffused his face with a deeper red. The scrawny old men and women followed in dismal discord. The children sang shrilly.

A popular tune crashed from the radio, almost drowning their voices.

The fat man paused for breath and again wiped his face with a sleeve.

*Hold out, my Brother, hold out to the end,  
I ain't got tard yet.*

*Hold out, my Brother, hold out to the end,  
I ain't got tard yet.*

The voice rose raucous and loud. The old women screeched, their eyes raised to heaven.

The crowd stared. The niggers across the street nodded and murmured, "Amen."

2

From the wide, granite slabs of the town hall steps Jim Deering and Sheriff Dan Nichols watched the niggers. There was power and force in the planter's tall, spare form. The nostrils of his aquiline nose dis-

tended slightly over thin lips. A large, felt hat shaded his gray eyes.

The sheriff's glance roamed to the stores facing the square.

"Reck'n they won't do much buyin' this ev'nin'," he remarked.

Deering glanced at his shiny, leather puttees.

"I've got seventy acres that haven't been picked," he said quietly. "Before we turn around it'll be time to work the peanut farms."

Nichols nodded sympathetically.

"These damn niggers don't want to work," Deering added.

A frown flashed across the sheriff's heavy face.

"I don't want to tell you how to run yo' business, Jim," he said hesitantly, "but I wouldn't jes' take 'em. Some o' these niggers git away an' do a lot o' talkin'. I haven't forgotten the hell raised over that last batch you took."

The planter's eyes moved restlessly over the streets.

"I don't intend to lose money just because niggers are too lazy to work," he said pointedly.