

PART I

The four old people sat on the porch watching the other people returning from the cemetery. It was November and the weather was cool, and the old people on the porch wore sweaters and coats. There were three women and one man, and the woman who sat on the floor in the door was cripple. Her back was broken when she was a baby and she had never walked a day of her life. She crawled over the floor as a child six months old would crawl, but this did not keep her from doing her house work, neither did it keep her from chopping grass in her garden, nor from gathering pecans in the back yard. The people who ~~walk~~ watched her do these things did not and could not feel sorry for her, because they had known her all their lives, and they knew she liked doing as much of the work as she could. When they came by the house and saw her in the garden chopping grass, or setting out onions, or pulling grass from among the cucumbers, they talked to her over the garden fence a while, then left her just as

they would leave anyone else. Her name was Lena Washington, but only a few people called her Lena. Most called her Le-na; some called her Tee Lene, others Cousin Lene, Aunt Lene, Miss Lene. She answered to any and all of the names. She had been on the plantation all of her life, sixty-two years. She had known Miss Jane Pittman, the dead woman, more than fifty of those years. She had known the other three people sitting on the porch just as long. She had one other person living with her, a twelve year old nephew whom she loved dearly, but whom she had to whip almost daily because he was never at the house when she needed him. Even now while she sat on the floor in the door she wondered where he was. She knew he was supposed to be at Miss Jane's funeral--she had kept him from school today to go to Miss Jane's funeral--but she knew he might be almost anywhere except at the cemetery.

The woman sitting in a chair to Lena's right was called Grace Turner. Grace was a tall, slim, proper woman of seventy. She walked erectly, she sat erectly, she talked slowly--never repeating herself. She came to Lena's house every day that she felt well enough to walk. They spoke Creole whenever they were alone. English was spoken only when it was necessary to communicate with the "Americans".

Etienne Bouie sat on the end of the porch with his back against a post. One of his legs hung over the end of the

porch, the other leg pointing toward the wall. Etienne Bouie was also in his seventies and had been considered a ladies' man. Even now he wore his old felt hat cocked a little to the side. He was very fond of telling jokes. Grace Turner who loved him and liked his jokes always cut her eyes at him whenever he told jokes about the Baptist Church. He considered himself a Catholic, but he had not been to any church for many years.

The fourth person on the porch, Olive Jarreau, sat in a chair on the other side of the door. She was a big brown skin ^{red} woman in her late sixties. She was extremely superstitious. She knew at least a dozen voodoo women--those who made their profession public as well as those who kept it secret. She knew people who had gone blind, some who had become cripple^d, and others who had gone insane from voodooism. She knew some of the secrets for combating the evil spirits, but for most she was completely helpless. She claimed to be a Christian, she was always singing on the porch or in her kitchen, but she very seldom went to church. She loved to fish, she was a good fisherwoman, and she went nearly every day. She ^{was} ~~was~~ extremely immaculate. She could not bear to see a speck of dirt ~~kkk~~ on her floor, nor a hill of grass or a leaf in her yard. A rose bush grew on either side of her steps, but the rest of the front yard^{was} as clean as her

could see the trees. She picked out a tall, leafless pecan tree, and she knew that Miss Jane was buried not far from there. She knew the exact place, just as she knew the exact places and names of ~~kkk~~ so many others out there.

"A new place tonight, Jane, but old faces," she thought.

She went back to the stove and touched the coffee pot again. The coffee was hot now, and she poured coffee into each cup and jar. When she came out onto the porch she went first to George Lewis and Neal Brown. Each man took a jar from the tray, and George Lewis put one spoonful of sugar into his coffee. Grace went next to Etienne Bouie who took a little broken handle cup. Like Neal Brown, he did not add any sugar to the coffee, either. But Olive Jarreau added three heaping teaspoonful and did not return the spoon until Grace told her to do so. Then Olive took the spoon out of her cup, licked it clean, and stuck it into the sugar dish. Grace turned away, disgusted with Olive, and went to Lean in the door. She had to bend over so Lena could reach the cup. When Lena had sweetened her coffee, Grace went back to her chair and sat down.

"Yes, indeed," George Lewis said, after he had drank from the jar.

"Yes, indeed," Olive Jarreau said, almost at the same time. Olive Jarreau had the habit of responding quickly after someone else had spoken. Sometimes she responded before

the other person had finished saying what was on his mind. "When the roll is called up yonder, we all got to answer," she added.

No one said anything for a while. No one usually spoke when Olive Jarreau made one of her deep comments. But when George Lewis realized that she was not going to say any more, he said:

"She was the last one, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was," Lena said.

"Aunt TaVene, now her," George Lewis said. "No more I can think of was born back there, can you, Le-na?"

"The last one," Lena said thoughtfully.

"Done Lord," Olive Jarreau said. "The last little link done broke in two."

"You know," George Lewis said, after a while. "I used to sit on that gallery over there and listen to her talk for hours and hours. And, Lord, could that old lady talk."

"You telling me," Neal Brown said.

The last of the people were returning from the cemetery now. They were the old people, walking slowly and unsteadily. They waved to the people on the porch as they went by the gate. Some of them stopped in the road a moment to say a word or two before going on.

George Lewis made himself comfortable on the porch. He sat back against one of the post and stretched out his long legs across the shoe- and weather-worn boards toward

Etienne Bouie. The time had come, now, to talk about Miss Jane Pittman. The people waited for George Lewis to begin.

Soldiers

Miss Jane said the Secesh army came first. The officers on horses, the troops walking, dragging the guns in the dust. When they came up even with the house, the officers came in the yard and the troops sat down beside the road. Miss Jane said her mistress made her serve the troops water while the mistress entertained the officers at the big house. She said she never hauled so much water in her life--buckets after buckets after buckets. The troops was tired, ragged, some of them even bleeding. They didn't see her. They took the cup from her, drunk the water, and handed the cup back to her, not seeing her once. One soldier kept saying over and over, "Just left to me, I'll turn the niggers loose, just left to me." Over and over, that's all he could say.

But these was the same ones who had told old mistress and other ladies like old mistress that they wouldn't be late for supper. Of course, that was before--when the war was just starting--when they thought fighting a war was nothing but a day's work. Miss Jane said they said, "Don't put my food up, Mama, and don't give it away. I'm going kill me up a few Yankees and come right on back home. Who they think they is, trying to destruck us way of living. We the Nobles.