

**Ernest J. Gaines**

# **BLOODLINE**

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ALSO BY

**Ernest J. Gaines**

*A Lesson Before Dying*

*A Gathering of Old Men*

*In My Father's House*

*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

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*For Dee with my deepest love*

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I figured it was about time she was coming to work, so I went to the door to look out for her. There she was, pushing the gate open and coming in the yard. She had on her long gray dress and the blue gingham apron. The apron was almost long as the dress and almost the same color—she had washed it so many times. She had on her big yellow straw hat, and I could see piece of the white rag on her head sticking out from under the hat. I stood in the shop door with a file and a plowshare and watched 'Malia come up the walk. She walked slow and tired, like any moment she might stop and go back. When she came in the shade of that big pecan tree, she raised her head and looked toward the tool shop. She knowed I'd be standing there.

"Making it on up, huh?" I said.

"Trying to," she said, and stopped to catch her breath.

Every morning when she came up to the yard like this, she stopped and we had a few words. Sometimes I went out in the yard where she was, sometimes I talked with her from the door. This morning I went out there because I wanted to ask her about that boy. I still had the file and the plowshare in my hand.

"I see Copper didn't come with you," I said.

"No," she said.

"No more than I expected from him," I thought to myself.

'Malia turned around and looked back toward the gate.

"That little incline getting steeper and steeper," she said.

"It get little steeper every day now, 'Malia," I said.

"Yes, Lord," she said.

It wasn't much of a incline. To them children who came to the yard to pick figs and pecans, it wasn't a incline at all. They could run it just like running on flat ground. But when you got old as she was—she was seventy-two, I was seventy—everything looked like a incline. Even walking downhill looked like a incline.

"Well, I better get on up there," she said, looking toward the house now. But she still didn't move, just standing there looking at the house behind the trees. You couldn't see much of the house for the moss hanging on the trees.

"How is he in there?" I asked her.

"Same," she said.

"He didn't come out yesterday."

"He wasn't feeling too strong," she said.

"You think this the last go round, 'Malia?"

"I hope not," she said. She spoke like she was very, very tired. "If it is, God pity every last one of us."

"She'll really let them Cajuns take over, won't she?"

"Won't she," 'Malia said.

"If Copper was white, then this plantation would go to him, not to her," I was thinking to myself. "But he's the wrong color to go round claiming plantations."

"Is Copper coming here at all today?" I asked 'Malia.

"No," she said.

"You told him Mr. Frank wanted to see him?"

"I told him," she said, looking up at me. I could see she was worried and scared. "Not that back door," he said. "Not

that back door?' I said. 'I been going through that back door nigh on fifty years, Copper.' 'That's not for me,' he said. 'What would my soldiers say if they caught me going through a back door?' "

'Malia looked at me a long time after she had said this. I could see she was worried and scared.

"Soldiers, 'Malia?" I said. "His soldiers?"

"Something disturbing Copper, Felix," she said. "When he talk he don't look right. He looking at you, but he ain't seeing you. This morning we was talking at the table, but he wasn't hearing me. He was just sitting there, looking out that door, looking far 'way."

"This part about the soldiers," I said; "you sure he said soldiers?"

"He said soldiers," she said.

Then she started crying. I held the file and the plowshare in one hand, and I put my other arm round her shoulders.

"Here," I said. "Here, now."

"I don't know what's the matter," she said. "God knows, I did all I could."

"Why'd he come back here, 'Malia?" I asked, after she stopped crying.

She wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand and shook her head.

"He didn't tell you?"

"No," she said. "He just talk."

"About what, 'Malia?"

"The earth for everybody. Just like the sun for everybody. Just like the stars for everybody."

"You think he got anything in mind?"

"Don't talk like that, Felix."

"They doing that everywhere else, 'Malia. Everywhere else but here."

"That's not it," she said. "That can't be it. God knows, I

don't hope to see that day." She looked toward the house again. "I better get on up there," she said. "Feel like I just want drop. I just want lay down and rest."

"Why don't you go back home, 'Malia? I'll take word you don't feel good."

"No, I'll make it," she said. "It won't be too much longer."

I watched her go toward the house. She was walking slow, with her head down. After she went in the little yard, I couldn't see her again till she went up the back stairs. It took her so long to go up the stairs, I thought she had sat down to rest. Then I saw her pulling open the screen door and going in. I went back to the shop and filed on my plowshare. Nobody told me to do things like that, but since I lived on the man's place and didn't have to pay rent, and since I didn't have nothing else to do but lay round the house if I stayed home, I came up there every day and worked to keep myself busy. While I was in the shop, I thought about that boy in the quarters. I thought about his mon and his paw, Walter Laurent. That was one, that Walter. A black woman, no matter who she was, didn't have a chance if he wanted her. He didn't care if it was in the field, in the quarters, the store or that house; when he got his dick up, he hopped on any of them. But them days are gone now, just like he's gone. That black stallion saw to that.

2: After I finished my plowshare, I hung it against the wall with all the other things. I had a little bit of everything there—cane knives, axes, shovels, hoes, scy' blades, yo-yo blades, clod-chopper discs—anything you cared to name, I had it. Every time I found something kind of rusty and needed working over, I brought it to the shop and cleaned it up. Once, there, this was my special job. From Monday morning

till Saturday night, my job was to keep everything in good shape to work in the field. Ah, but that was long, long ago. Now all the old ones are dying, and the young ones are leaving—and the Cajuns are taking over a little more every year. So I came up to the yard now just to keep the old hands busy. Because once the hands had stopped, the man wasn't no more.

I hadn't been in the shop more than half an hour when I heard that yellow gal, Dee-Dee, calling me out there in the yard. I went to the door to see what she wanted.

"He want you in there," she said, pointing toward the house.

"Who want me where?" I said.

"Mr. Frank," she said, pointing.

I went back in the shop to put up the hammer I had been working with, then I came back out there where she was. She was standing in a clump of bull grass waiting for me. That little white dress she wore wasn't just short, it was so thin you could see drawers and everything else under it.

"What's he want in there?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "Just say come out here and find you."

"Ain't Stateman in there?"

"He in there begging with his clean-head self," she said.

"You ought to give Stateman what he want," I said.

"Make yourself a nice little piece of change."

"Huh," she said. "Bet he die 'fore I let him crawl on top of me."

We went through the little gate and up the back stairs. Dee-Dee stopped in the kitchen and told me to go on to the dining room. Frank Laurent was sitting at the table eating breakfast when I came in there. He was dressed in his purple silk robe. He looked awful sick and weak that morning.

Frank was in his late sixties. He had suffered a heart at-

tack about five years ago, and the doctor told him he had to hire a' overseer or give this place over to his niece to operate. He hired the overseer like the doctor said, but a few months later he fired him. He tried to manage the place by himself again and suffered another attack. The doctor told him the next one could kill him. So he hired another overseer, and this one was still there. The trouble was, though, the overseer had little to do with running the place outside of keeping a' eye on the Cajuns to make sure they didn't cheat Frank out of everything. He didn't have any say-so over the colored people in the quarters (since they wasn't share-cropping), and the only time he ever came up to the house was when Frank sent for him, and Frank sent for him least as he could.

Frank was the last of the old Laurents. When he died, the place was going to fall to his niece there in Bayonne. Besides the overseer and the doctor, his niece was the only other white person to come to the house. Every time she came there she told Frank he ought to go to the hospital where the doctors could give him the kind of treatment he needed. But Frank and all of us knowed that all she wanted was to get him out of that house so she could take over. After she did that, that was going to be the end of us. We was going to have to pay rent or we was going to have to leave. I doubt if half of the people on the place could do either one.

"You sent for me, Mr. Frank?" I said.

He didn't even look at me. He went on eating like I wasn't even there. 'Malia came in with a cup of coffee. She had taken off her straw hat, but she still had the white rag on her head. She put the cup of coffee in front of Frank, then she stood behind the chair looking at me and shaking her head. I could tell they had had some kind of squabble before I came in.

"Go get that boy," Frank said, pushing his plate back and pulling the cup in.

"Sir?" I said.

He didn't say any more. He raised the cup to his mouth. I didn't move.

"Are you deaf, Felix?" he said.

"Mr. Frank, I done already said Copper ain't coming through that back door," 'Malia said.

"You shut up back there," Frank said. "Well?" he said to me.

"'Malia's right," I said.

"What?" Frank said.

"Copper's not coming through that back door, Mr. Frank," I said.

He looked straight in my eyes a long time, then he said: "You getting tired of this place, Felix? Tired beating on that one piece of iron day in and day out; year in and year out?"

"No sir," I said.

"You must be," Frank said. "I'd say you must be awful tired, Felix."

"Not a bit," I said. "I just want you to know the facts about Copper."

Frank tried to look hard, but he knowed I knowed all that hardness had gone. The plantation had taken all that hardness out of him when the others died and left it there for him to manage. It was too heavy for him. When something's too heavy, it makes most people wild animals or it breaks them. The land had broken Frank. It had aged him too fast. It had given him two heart attacks—and the next one was going to kill him. He knowed I knowed all of this. He knowed I knowed he wasn't hard, he was helpless. But he was still the authority there, and when he spoke I was supposed to move.

"You better get down the quarters," he said.

"Can I ask why, Mr. Frank?"

"Why?" he said. "Why? He's on my place, that's why. Any nigger on this place moves when I say move. He's no different from any of the rest."

"Ain't he, Mr. Frank?"

Frank didn't say anything. He raised the cup, and looked at me over the rim of the cup.

"I'll tell him you sent for him," I said. "Who I'm suppose to say?"

"You forgot my name, Felix?"

"No sir. I just thought you might want me to say his uncle, though."

"You pushing your luck, Felix, you know that, don't you?"

I nodded. "I reckon so."

I looked at 'Malia standing behind the chair, and I could see she wanted to cry again. I went out in the hall; there was Stateman with his head shining and his eyes rolling. He wanted to know what was happening in the dining room. When I told him to go in there and ask Frank himself, he looked at me real hard and turned away. He was Frank's butler, he had been there ever since Frank suffered his first heart attack; but me and 'Malia had been there almost long as Frank had been there, and he told us more than he ever told anybody else. And that's why he never scared me. I obeyed his orders because I respected him; not because I was scared of him.

**3:** 'Malia's house was the first one in the quarters, a little gray house that hadn't been painted in ages. She had two little chinaball trees and a mulberry tree in the front yard. In the morning, the trees had shade on the gallery. In the evening, the sun was behind the house, so 'Malia still had shade on the gallery. Hot as it was now, you needed shade or you couldn't sit outside at all.

Before I got to the house, I could see that boy standing on the gallery looking at me. When I got closer I saw he was dressed all in khakis. He even had on brown Army shoes—the

shoes shining like new tin. I unhooked the gate and went in the yard—but I never got up the steps. I didn't even make a 'tempt to go up the steps. That boy's face stopped me: his eyes stopped me. His eyes looked hard as marble. I'm sure he knowed why I was there even before I opened my mouth.

"Mr. Frank want you to come visit him," I said from the ground.

He didn't say anything—just standing there in that Army uniform, looking down at me. He looked more like Walter Laurent than Walter ever looked like himself. Tall, slim, with a long face just like Walter. Only difference was, he was brown with curly black hair; his paw was white with straight brown hair.

"Go back and tell my uncle Generals don't go through back doors," he said.

"Tell him what?"

He didn't say any more, he just looked at me. He looked at me the same way any the other Laurents would 'a' looked at me. No, he looked at me the way Walter would 'a' looked at me if he had told me to do something and I had asked him what. You didn't ask a Laurent what; you did what the Laurent said.

"You're his adjutant, aren't you?" he said.

"His what?"

He gived me that Laurent look again. For a few seconds he might 'a' been thinking about something else: I was so little in his sight.

"His runner?" he said.

"He told me to come find you, and that's all I know."

"No one *comes* for the General," he said.

Then soon as he said it he wasn't looking at me any more, he was looking past me, his eyes hard as marble. I didn't know what to do after that. I didn't know if I ought to speak

to him again or turn around and go back to the house. I lowered my head a second, and when I looked up, I saw him pulling a tablet and a pencil out of his Army shirt pocket. (The uniform was starched and pressed with all the creases. I'm sure this was the first time he had put it on since he got it out the cleaners.) He started writing with his left hand fast, just like Walter. He wrote about a minute. When he got through, he folded the piece of paper and held it out toward me. He didn't reach it out—I mean he didn't bend over and handed it to me; he just held it out. I went up the steps to get it, and my hand was shaking.

After I had gone out of the yard and had hooked the gate back, I looked up at him again. He wasn't looking at me now, he was looking down the quarters. But from the way his face was set, I doubt if he was seeing a thing.

When I got back to the house, I pulled the kitchen door open real quietly. There was Stateman, with his head shining, trying to feel up that yellow gal. He jumped back when he saw me and made 'tend he wasn't doing anything.

"You want me to give Mr. Frank a message or something?" he asked.

"No, that's all right," I said. "Just go on and try to get what you was trying to get before I came in. Mr. Frank and 'Malia still in the dining room?" I asked Dee-Dee.

"And what I was trying to get?" Stateman said.

"They in the library," Dee-Dee said.

"Don't get things mixed up round here, now," Stateman said. "If I was trying to get something you say I was trying to get, I wouldn't need a thing like you to tell me I was trying to get it."

I left him there and went up the hall to the library.

'Malia was sitting in one corner sewing a dress; Frank was in another corner reading a book. Both of them was sitting by a lamp. The big window between them was opened, but a tree outside the window always kept the room dark and cool. Frank looked up from his book and squinted his eyes when he didn't see Copper standing there with me.

"He sent you this," I said, carrying him the note.

Frank looked straight in my face all the time I was walking toward him. Even after he took the note, he still looked at me a long time before he lowered his eyes to read it. His face didn't change once all the time he was reading. He must 'a' read it two or three times before he looked up again.

"You wrote this, Felix?" he said.

He must 'a' been joking. I hadn't written a letter in my life, and he knowed that.

"Me?" I said.

"I see," he said. "You got him to do it."

But he didn't believe that, either. He said it because he couldn't think of anything else to say. He said it because Copper had sent him a note instead of coming here himself.

"All I did was tell him what you said," I said. "He did the rest."

"Sure," he said.

He knowed that's what had happened, but he didn't know Copper, and so he had to put it on me. He looked down at the note.

"'My Dear Uncle,'" he said. He kept his eyes on the note another second, then he looked up at me. "He calls me 'Dear Uncle.'"

I shifted my feet a little, but I didn't say anything. Frank squinted up at me, with his mouth twisted a little to the side. He did this probably half a minute, then he looked down at the note again.



"My Dear Uncle," he said. He passed the tips of his finger and his thumb over the corners of his mouth, then he touched at his chest. "My Dear Uncle," he said again. "Let us speak General to General, gentleman to gentleman, Laurent to Laurent. I am sure you did not understand my position as a General, as a leader of men, when you invited me to your house through the back door. I believe you had in mind one of your slaves in the quarters, or one of your Cajun sharecroppers on the river; but not me. If I thought you meant that invitation, I would tell you, without hesitation, where to put that back door. But I am sure you did not mean it, therefore I have forgotten about it. If you wish to send me any other messages—an apology, or an invitation to speak to me as a General, as a Laurent, you can send the message to me in the quarters. I shall be there reconnoitering the area. Your respectful kin, General Christian Laurent."

Frank kept his head down another minute, like he was reading the note all over again. Then he squinted up at me and twisted his mouth slightly to the left.

"Is this boy crazy, or do you all think it was time you took over?"

"Took over?" I said. "I don't know what you talking about, Mr. Frank."

"Who sent for Copper?"

"Sent for him? Nobody sent for Copper," I said. "Nobody knowed where that boy was since his mon died there."

He knowed I was telling him the truth, but he wanted me to believe he thought different.

"This General—what does he mean by General? And Laurent—doesn't he know better than to say things like that round here?"

"I just brought the note," I said.

"And you're innocent as a baby, huh, Felix? You want me to believe that?"

"Believe what you want, Mr. Frank," I said. "I didn't

have nothing to do with Copper coming back here."

"You getting smart with me, Felix?"

"No sir," I said, and I lowered my eyes.

"And you?" I heard him asking 'Malia. Now he had to bring her in it, too. "How innocent are you?"

"Mr. Frank, till Copper showed up here yesterday, I hadn't seen him or heard from him in ten years. Since his mon died."

"So everybody is innocent, is that it?" he said. "That nigger comes here calling himself a Laurent, calling himself a General, walking over my place like he owns it—and everybody is innocent? I'm supposed to believe that?"

It was quiet in the room while Frank looked at me and 'Malia.

"Felix, go over to that store and get me two of the biggest niggers you can find," he said. "Saturday, there ought to be a dozen of them over there."

5: There wasn't a dozen round the store, but there was seven or eight of them there. Frank, Alcie and Tom-Tom was playing cards on the end of the gallery. Pool-Doo, Crowley and Simon was drinking soda water under that big pecan tree in front of Mr. Pichot house. Joby and Little Boy was sitting on the steps talking. Mr. Pichot, the old Cajun who ran the store, sat by the door in his chair. He had the chair cocked back against the wall, and his feet wasn't touching the floor.

"Little Boy, you and Joby, Mr. Frank want y'all," I said, after I had spoke to everybody.

"Who—us—for what?" Little Boy said. "What we done?"

"Come on," I said.

"Lord, have mercy," Little Boy said. "Now, what? People can't even rest round here on Saturday."

They followed me round the store back to the house.

Little Boy was grumbling all the way; Joby was keeping quiet. When we came in the kitchen, I saw Stateman ducking down the hall. I supposed he had been trying to feel up that yellow gal again.

"What's this?" she said, when she saw Little Boy and Joby.

"How I'm supposed to know," Little Boy said. "They don't tell nobody nothing."

Dee-Dee started laughing, and we left her back there laughing. I knocked on the library door, and when 'Malia told us to come in, I nodded for Little Boy and Joby to go in first. Little Boy and Joby, both of them with their hats in their hands, stood before Frank Laurent like two little children. 'Malia, in her corner, went on sewing like nothing was happening. Poor 'Malia was so tired, and she had seen so much foolishness, things like this didn't bother her much any more.

"You two niggers stay on my place?" Frank asked.

"Course we do, Mr. Frank," Little Boy said. "You know us."

"Do I?" Frank said. "The only thing I know is that somebody's running round this place telling me where I can put that back door, and I—"

"No sir, no sir," Little Boy said. "I didn't say that—I didn't. But Joby, he could 'a'. 'Cause just like you see him standing there, Joby got a big mouth. I done told Joby, I done told Joby—I said, 'Joby, mind your mouth; mind your mouth, boy, or one of these good days it go'n get you in a lot of trouble.' I told him that no later than, I think, last Sunday." He turned to Joby. "Didn't I tell you that?"

"I don't 'member you telling me nothing," Joby said.

"I did tell you that, Joby."

"You didn't," Joby said. "'Cause I didn't see you Sunday. I seen you Saturday."

"Then I told you Saturday," Little Boy said. "I knowed it was one of them days."

"Where you told me that at?" Joby said. "Where? At the fair? At the road? In Bayonne? Where? The store?"

"In one of them places," Little Boy said. "I can't 'member everything."

"You ain't told me nothing," Joby said. He turned toward Frank, and I could see he wanted to cry. "Mr. Frank, I swear by my mama Little Boy ain't told me nothing."

Frank had been squinting up at them all the time they stood there squabbling. Even after they quit, he still looked at them a long time before he said anything.

"You two mind if I go on now?" he said.

Little Boy looked at Frank, but Joby lowered his head. He was waiting to hear the punishment Frank was going to give him.

"Either of you know Copper?" Frank asked.

"Miss Amalia's nephew?" Little Boy said, pointing toward 'Malia in the corner. "Yes sir, I know him. He's down the quarters right now."

"Go down there and bring him back up here," Frank said. "I don't want any scars on him, I don't want any broken bones, but I want him up here."

"Yes sir," Little Boy said. Then he turned to 'Malia. "Hope that's all right with you, Miss Amalia?"

"What did you ask her?" Frank said.

"I was just telling Miss Amalia over there I hope it's all right with her if—" Little Boy stopped.

"You're asking *her* if it's all right when I told you to do something?" Frank asked him.

"I wouldn't want do nothing she might not—" Little Boy stopped again before he finished.

"Do like Mr. Frank say," 'Malia said, with her head down.

"Just a minute," Frank said. "Who the hell's running this place, me or Amalia?"

"I guess you, Mr. Frank," Little Boy said.

"You guess, nigger?" Frank said. "You guess?"

Little Boy lowered his head, but Frank kept on looking at him. Then all of a sudden his face changed. Like only now he re'lized, maybe he wasn't running the place. Maybe somebody else *was* running it after all. Or, maybe nobody was running it. Maybe it was just running down.

"Get out of here," he said.

"Yes sir," Little Boy said. "Joby, come on."

They went out. I started to follow them, but Frank stopped me. I turned toward him with my cap in my hand.

"This whole place gone mad?" he said.

I didn't answer him.

"You hear me talking to you, Felix, goddamn it," he said.

"It ain't mad, Mr. Frank," I said. "It ain't no more like it used to be, that's all."

"What you're trying to say is that I'm not running this place any more? You and Amalia are?"

"Nobody's running the place, Mr. Frank," I said. "The Cajuns sharecropping it, and the overseer seeing that—"

"I'm running it, damn you," he said. "I'm running it."

I nodded. "Yes sir."

Then that look came on his face again. "I'm not running nothing," it said. "They know I'm not running nothing; I know I'm not running nothing."

"Why did they have to leave me here?" he said out loud. "Why did I have to be the one to stay?"

"Now, stop that," 'Malia said.

"Why?" he said again. "Why? I wanted no part of it. Why did they have to dump it on my lap?"

"You have relatives there," 'Malia said. "She'd be glad to take it off your hands."

"Is that what you all want, for her to take it over?" he asked 'Malia. He looked at 'Malia a while, but she went on

sewing. "Is that what you want?" he said. "And do you know what'll happen then? She would kick you off the place before I was cold in my grave. She would let the Cajuns plow up the ground where your houses are now. And that cemetery back there, what do you think'll happen to it? Do you think she would hesitate a moment before she plowed that under too? Do you have another plot of land picked out for the bones, Amalia? Now, do you know why I go on?"

"Vexing yourself like that won't let you go on much longer," 'Malia said.

"I was all right until that nigger got here," Frank said. "Until your nephew got here, Amalia."

"Us nephew," 'Malia said softly, with her head down.

"What did you say?" Frank asked her. "What did you say, Amalia?"

She kept her head down; she didn't answer him.

"I heard you," Frank said. "You joining Felix and that nigger, too, huh?"

'Malia raised her head and looked at him. "Ain't that's why you want Copper here, Mr. Frank?" she said.

"That nigger is on my place," Frank said. "Any nigger on my place comes to my house when I say come."

"Look like Mr. Walter got plenty more round here nobody ain't been sending for," 'Malia said.

Frank got whiter. 'Malia had never talked to him like that before. If she wasn't so tired, and if Copper hadn't had her so mixed up, I'm sure she wouldn't 'a' talked like that now. Frank raised his hand real slowly, then he pushed it inside the robe quickly and rubbed his chest. He was breathing fast and hard, like he was trying to catch his breath. 'Malia jumped up from the chair and ran to him.

"You all right?" she asked him. "You all right? You want your pills? You want the doctor? Mr. Frank? Mr. Frank, you hear me?"

He didn't answer her. His head was bowed. He rubbed his chest hard as he could.

"Mr. Frank?" Malia said. She turned to me. "Felix?"

"Sit down," Frank said, out of breath. He never raised his head. "Sit down."

Malia moved back to her chair, but she didn't sit down. I just stood there watching. I didn't know what to do. After a while, Frank raised his head and looked at Malia.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked her. "What's the matter, Malia? Did you hear the tractors knocking over the house?"

Malia sat back down, but she kept on watching him. Frank rubbed his chest inside the robe. The room was absolutely quiet all this time.

"What does that nigger look like?" Frank asked me.

"Who, Copper?" I said. Because I was still thinking about what had just happened. And I could hear the tractors knocking over the houses and plowing up the graves.

"Who do you think I'm talking about, Felix?"

"He's a tall, slim boy," I said.

"He's a tall, slim boy," Frank said, mocking me. "He's a tall, slim boy.' Does he have hands? Is he green? Does he speak Russian?"

"He's brown," I said. "Gray eyes. A long face. He writes with his left hand."

"And because he writes with his left hand, he can't come through that back door?"

I didn't answer him.

"Well?" he said.

"That's why he won't come through that back door, Mr. Frank," I said.

"He'll come through that back door, and he'll be glad to come through that back door," Frank said. "You can go back to your hammering now."

"Thank you," I said, and turned to leave.

"That one piece of iron ought to be thin as a razor blade by now," Frank said.

I faced him again. "It's not the same piece," I said. "I got all that old stuff there."

"You've never told me why you stay in there so much," he said, squinting up at me.

"Maybe some day somebody'll use it again," I said.

"And who may that somebody be?" he said. "Copper?"

"I don't know, Mr. Frank," I said. "Maybe it will be Copper."

"Yes, maybe it will be Copper, Felix," Frank said. "But I'll be in my grave before that day comes."

**6:** I went to the store to get me a pack of tobacco, then I went back to the shop. I had done no more than picked up my file when I heard that yellow gal calling me out there again. When I got to the door, I saw her standing out there with a basket of clothes in her arms. She was on her way from the clothesline.

"Now, what?" I said.

"Samson been calling you," she said.

"Samson?" I said. "What—"

"Yonder," she said, pointing with the basket. "Look like he got Joby and Little Boy tied together."

Joby and Little Boy faced the gate like a pair of mules or a pair of oxen that had been working the fields all day. Samson was holding something behind them, but I didn't know what it was till I got closer. Then I saw it was the end of a trace chain, with the other end wrapped around both Joby and Little Boy. The first thing to come to my mind was a bad dog or a bull. "Yes, a bull," I thought; "a bull. Ben's bull. He got out the pasture and took after them. When they saw him coming, they tried to get under Samson's wire fence, but the

fence was too low. But, wait," I thought. "Wait, now. I can see a bull running you under a wire fence and making you rip half your clothes off, but where would that bull get a chain from?"

Then Samson told me: Copper.

"Sure, sure," I thought. "Copper." Only it hadn't darted my mind that one human being would do that to two more of his own kind.

Samson told me what happened, then he gived me the end of the trace chain he was holding. Copper had tied their hands behind their back with their own belts.

"Maybe this'll convince him he don't want come up here," I said to Samson.

"I don't know 'bout him, but I'm sure you couldn't pay these here to go mess with him again," Samson said. "I done seen some fighting in my days, but I ain't never seen none like that young man can put up. Biff, boff; ooof, off. You got to be possessed to fight like that."

"Let's go," I said to Joby and Little Boy. "Thanks, Samson."

"My pleasure," Samson said. "He paid me a quarter to bring them up here. Yes, you got to be possessed to fight like that. Boff, biff. Doggonest thing I ever seen in my life."

We started toward the house. That yellow gal was still out in the yard with that basket of clothes. When we came closer to her, she started laughing. She laughed so hard, she dumped half of the clothes out of the basket on the grass.

Stateman met us at the door; he said he didn't know if he could allow us to come in there, seeing the way we was looking. I pushed him to the side and nodded for Joby and Little Boy to go on up the hall. I knocked on the door, and when 'Malia told us to come in, I let them go in first.

'Malia made a loud groan and throwed her hand up to her mouth when she saw Little Boy and Joby. But Frank's

expression didn't change. You would 'a' thought Stateman had just brought him a cold glass of water and that was all. After he had looked at Joby and Little Boy, he looked at the trace chain that tied them together. He looked at it the way you look at something, but you not really seeing it. The way you look at something, but at the same time you thinking about something else. Then he looked at 'Malia. 'Malia a while, then Joby and Little Boy again, then me. I'm sure he thought we was doing all this to either run him crazy or kill him. Then he probably thought maybe he ought to let us kill him. If we killed him, then he wouldn't have to go through the torment of keeping up this place day in and day out. He would be free of this place, free of us (who, he said, he never wanted), and he would be free of all his pains.

He covered his mouth to cough. Then he said pardon.

"Sir?" Little Boy asked, raising his head.

"'Pardon,'" Frank said.

"Yes sir," Little Boy said, lowering his head again and jingling the chains.

Now, it got quiet again. All this time, Frank was waiting for me to start talking. He had been waiting for me to explain since we came in there. But I was waiting for him to ask me what had happened. He knowed what had happened, but he thought it was my place to start off first. Well, I wasn't going to say a word till he opened his mouth.

Then he couldn't hold back any more. He looked at me like I was the cause for all of this. He knowed I wasn't. He knowed it was Copper and just Copper. But since he couldn't reach Copper, he had to accuse me. Like a man who beat his mule because his wife beat him; or the man who go home and beat his child because the overseer cussed him out in the field.

"Well, Felix?" he said.

"All right, Little Boy," I said.

Little Boy started off, but Frank wasn't looking at Little Boy, he was still looking at me—still accusing me. Sure, he knowed I didn't have nothing to do with it, but since he couldn't touch Copper, he had to touch somebody else. It would 'a' been 'Malia if I wasn't there, but since I was, and since it was me who had brought the note from Copper, and since it was me who had brought Little Boy and Joby in there, then I had to be the one to blame.

“. . . down there with that little brown tablet and that pencil, looking at Mr. Rufus old house,” Little Boy was saying.

I looked at Little Boy again. His blue denim shirt looked like a line of ribbons. I'm sure if Samson hadn't told me what had happened, I would 'a' thought somebody had put Little Boy in a pit with a bobcat. Only, the person had tied Little Boy's hands behind his back and had told that bobcat to go to work on him.

“. . . I went there and told him you wanted to see him,” Little Boy was saying, “but he didn't pay me no mind. After he got through writing up the house, he jumped the ditch and sighted 'long the fence, then he jumped back and writ some more on that little tablet. He looked down at the ditch a little while and even writ something 'bout it, too.”

“After he had pulled up piece of that jimpson weed and chewed it,” Joby told Little Boy.

Joby lowered his head again. Little Boy nodded. The chain jingled when either one of them moved.

“Yeah,” Little Boy said. “After he had pulled up piece of that jimpson weed and tasted it, he writ something 'bout it in that little tablet. Bitter or sweet, I don't know. Then after he got through there, he went down to Compaa house . . .”

Frank was looking at Little Boy, but you could see he was thinking about something else. Maybe he was thinking he was dreaming. Maybe he was thinking he was in a crazy house, or maybe he was dead and this was hell.

“I told him again you wanted to see him, but he just went right on writing,” Little Boy said. “Acting more like he was white—like he was Mr. Walter—”

He stopped again. That was something he wasn't ever supposed to say. Anybody in the world who had ever seen Walter Laurent and saw Copper could see that Walter Laurent was Copper's paw. But you wasn't supposed to ever say it.

When Frank heard his brother's name, his eyes shifted a little. He had been looking at Little Boy all this time, but he hadn't been listening to him. But hearing Walter's name woke him up. He started looking at Joby and Little Boy like it was just that moment he re'lized they was in the room.

“Where did you meet the bears?” he said.

“B'ars, sir?” Little Boy said.

Frank nodded. “B'ars.”

“Me and Joby ain't met no b'ars nowhere, sir,” Little Boy said.

“Sure, you did,” Frank said.

Little Boy and Joby looked at each other like two small children. They didn't know if to agree with Frank or not. To say yes, they met bears would 'a' been a lie, and they could be punished. To say no, they didn't meet any bears would 'a' been calling Frank a lie, and they could be punished for that, too. So they looked at each other, not saying a thing. For my part, all I wanted to do was laugh.

“I sent you and Joby down the quarters to find Copper,” Frank said. “But Copper told both of you to go to hell. You didn't go to hell—no, you came back up here to tell me what Copper had said, and that's when you met the two bears. One grabbed you and threw you down, the other one grabbed Joby and did him the same. They took off your belts, wore out your butts, and tied your hands behind your backs. But that wasn't all. One of the bears happened to have a chain 'cross his shoulder. Where he got the chain from, we won't ques-

tion. But he tied you and Joby together and sent you on your way."

Little Boy started shaking his head and giggling.

"Mr. Frank, you too much," he said.

Frank looked at 'Malia sitting in the other chair. He was probably wondering if he ought to accuse her of helping me and Copper. 'Malia just sat there with her head bowed. Poor woman.

"Me and Joby followed him down to Aunt Johnson after he got through writing up Compaa house, and I told him what you said again," Little Boy said. "He didn't pay me no mind, he just went right on writing. Aunt Johnson sitting out there on that gallery, looking at him, not saying a word. Just sitting there shelling beans in that lard bucket and smoking that corb pipe."

Frank looked from 'Malia to Little Boy. He was hearing Little Boy, but he was thinking about something else. Probably who Aunt Johnson was and what a corb pipe was. Then I could see, by the way his eyes shifted, he remembered Aunt Johnson was so and so—probably the old lady who used to come out to the store and argue with Mr. Pichot all the time. A corb pipe was probably a corn cob pipe.

"When he got through with her house, he went on down to Samson," Little Boy said. "It was there, in front of Samson, Joby, there, thought 'bout th'owing him down and toting him back up here."

Joby jerked up his head. "Me?" he said. "Me? How come it's always me? You the one say let's th'ow him down and car' him back up there. You the one. You. Not me. You."

"All right, I said it," Little Boy said. He turned to 'Malia. "I'm sorry, Miss Amalia."

'Malia looked in his face and looked at his clothes. His blue denim shirt was a line of ribbons, little ribbons and big ones. A big chunk of cloth was ripped from his left pant leg, and you could see a big cut just under his knee. After 'Malia

had looked at him a moment, she nodded her head to show him she understood, and she lowered her eyes again.

"I tripped him over," Little Boy went on. "He jumped back up quicker than any human being you ever seen and slammed into Joby. Two quick chops 'cross Joby shoulder blade with the side of his hand, and down went Joby. I tried to grab him again, but the first thing I knowed I was tangled in Samson wire fence. Joby got up to help me, and the next thing I knowed Joby was tangled there, too.

"He made us untangle each other, then he made us take off us belts and he tied us hands behind us back. He told Samson to bring him a chain or a rope. Samson leaned the broom 'gainst the wall and went out in the back yard and brought a chain like he said. He tied us together with the chain and gived Samson a quarter to bring us up here. The last thing I seen, he was sharpening that pencil again."

"How much did Copper pay you niggers to come back up here with that tale?" Frank asked.

"Pay us?" Joby said, jerking up his head and jingling the chains. "Pay us? He didn't pay nobody but Samson."

"How much is Felix paying you?" Frank asked.

Both of them looked at me like two scared children. Two men, both of them close to two hundred pounds, looking at me like two scared children. They didn't know what to say, what to think; they turned to Frank again.

"Do you know what Mr. Walter would have done with you two trifling niggers?"

Neither one of them answered him.

"Well?" he said.

"No sir," Little Boy said.

"He would have hanged one of you. Right out there in the yard. The other one would have gone back down there and brought Copper up here gently as a baby." He looked at them a long time to let his words soak in. "Get out of here," he said.

They turned to leave. I gived Little Boy the end of the chain I had been holding. They went out with the chain jingling.

Frank looked at me again.

"Go back to that store and get me six more," he said. "Hot as it is—Saturday, too—you probably have the whole plantation over there drinking soda water."

"Why don't you leave Copper 'lone, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said. "If he don't want come see you, I wouldn't force him. Leave him 'lone."

"Leave him alone, hell," Frank said. "Not on my place will I leave him alone. Get moving, you traitor."

"Mr. Frank, please," 'Malia said.

"Well?" he said to me.

"You the authority," I said, and went out.

"Is that any way to talk to Felix?" I heard 'Malia saying through the door. "Is that any way to talk to Felix? Who you got beside me and Felix, Mr. Frank? Who?"

"Nobody," I heard him saying.

7: More of them had gathered round the store when I came over there. If they wasn't laying on the gallery, they was standing under that big pecan tree to the side. All of them was talking about what had happened down the quarters. J. W. Hudson, that big-mouth boy of Aunt Jude Hudson, was leading the talk. He was showing everybody else what Little Boy and Joby had done wrong. They had gone on Copper wrong, he said. They shouldn't 'a' talked so much. They should 'a' just got him by surprise and brought him on back up the quarters.

I sat on the end of the gallery, smoking a cigarette and listening to J. W. By the time I had finished my cigarette, I figured Mr. J. W. had convinced everybody out there he

knowed the best way to capture Copper. I went over to the tree and told him Frank wanted him at the house.

"Me? For what?" he said. "What I done?"

I didn't answer him. I counted out five more and told them to follow me.

When we came back to the house, that yellow gal was standing by the kitchen table wrapping a bandage over Little Boy's shoulder. She had bathed the scratches in Epsom-salt water, she had put salve on them, and now she was wrapping the shoulder with a piece of bar cloth. She had already fixed up Joby and he was standing to the side holding the trace chain.

"I guess he trying to get y'all killed now, huh?" Little Boy said.

"Be still," Dee-Dee said. "Letting one man beat two. Bet he couldn't beat you eating."

I knocked on the library door, and when 'Malia answered, I nodded for J. W. and his gang to go in. When the last one had stepped inside, I moved in and shut the door.

"You know why you're here?" Frank asked them.

"Copper, sir?" J. W. said.

"Yes. Copper. You know he's tough, don't you?"

"No one man can beat no six, Mr. Frank; I don't care how tough he is," J. W. said.

"I hope you're trying to convince me and not yourself," Frank said. "I want him brought up here. I don't care if you have to drag him from one end of the quarters to the other. If he get hooked in the fence, drag him through it. If you catch him hiding in somebody's house, drag him down the steps. But bring him back up here. Then stand him on his feet at the foot of those stairs. He will *walk* through that back door."

"He will, Mr. Frank," J. W. said. "You don't have to worry 'bout that."



"I'm not worrying," Frank said. "You worry if you don't get him up here."

"He'll be up here, sir. You can rest your mind on that."

Frank looked at J. W. a long time, like he wanted to be sure to remember him. J. W. couldn't take Frank's glaring at him, and he lowered his head.

"What's your name?" Frank asked.

J. W. raised his head. "I'm J. W., Mr. Frank," he said, grinning. "Renton Hudson boy."

"How is Renton?"

"Papa dead, Mr. Frank. Been dead couple years now. Mama, she living, though."

Frank nodded and grunted.

"You can leave," he said.

"Yes sir," J. W. said, and turned to the others. "Come on, fellows; let's go find that tush-hog."

They went out. I started to follow them, but Frank stopped me.

"Go back there and tell that gal to fix you up some food," he said. "Should be round your dinner time, shouldn't it?"

"Don't b'lieve I'm hungry," I said.

He wanted to make up for the way he had talked to me just before I went to get J. W., and I wanted him to know it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Well, you might as well sit down over there," he said.

"I was thinking I ought to get back in the shop," I said. "Since I ain't done too much today, yet."

"Can't you stay a minute?" he said. "Or do I have to beg you, too?"

"Sit down, Felix," 'Malia said quietly.

I went to the chair in the other corner, and I brushed off my pants before I sat down. It was the first time I had ever sat in the library, but I had sat in the living room two or three times when they had wakes there.

It was quiet in the room now. 'Malia went on stitching the dress. Frank went to the window to look out in the yard. Once there, I caught him rubbing at his chest. He was always doing that now. Like he had to do that to keep his heart beating.

"I didn't write the rules," he said, looking out the window. He wasn't talking to us, he was just talking out loud. "And I won't try to change them. He must come through that back door."

I looked at 'Malia in her corner, but she kept her head down. Frank turned from the window and looked at me.

"And you don't think he will?"

"No sir," I said. "Not him."

"You're pretty sure of that, aren't you, Felix? Aren't you?"

"Yes sir," I said. "Because you never would 'a' gone through a back door, Mr. Frank; neither Mr. Walter, neither y'all daddy."

"Keep talking, Felix."

"That's about all," I said.

"You didn't finish," Frank said. "You forgot to mention his mon, Felix. She was black."

"She born him, Mr. Frank, that's all," I said. "Copper is a Laurent. No Laurent's walking through any back door—'specially one he half figures belong to him, anyway."

"So you did send for him?" Frank said.

"No sir," I said. "No more than you or 'Malia did, Mr. Frank. But I took a good look at him when I went down to that house. And I looked at him yesterday when he got here. Not that one, Mr. Frank."

"We'll see," Frank said.

"Can I leave now?"

"You'll leave when I tell you to leave."

"You the authority," I said.

Then it got quiet again—too quiet. I looked at 'Malia stitching on the dress, but I could tell Frank was still looking at me from the window. I could tell he was mad, I could tell he was getting madder.

"What am I supposed to do?" he said, when he couldn't hold back any more. "Change the rules? Do you know how old these rules are? They're older than me, than you, than this entire place. I didn't make them, I came and found them here. And I—an invalid—am I supposed to change them all? Haven't I fed you when you were hungry, given you a place to sleep? If you're sick I give you medicine whether you have money or not. I don't charge you a penny rent, I don't charge a cent for the food you raise in your gardens. What more am I supposed to do—give you the house and move into the quarters? Do you think you'll live better then? Well?"

"You better watch your heart," 'Malia said, very softly, and never raising her head.

"To hell with my heart," Frank said. "To hell with you, the place, Felix—everything."

"That ain't being too smart," 'Malia said, still very softly, and still not looking at him.

"So today is my day to be criticized, eh?" he said. "Is that what it's coming to?"

"Nobody's trying to criticize you, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said. "I just said your heart."

"Like hell, nobody's trying to criticize me," Frank said. "What the hell's Felix been doing ever since he got up this morning?"

"Can I leave now?" I said.

"You start toward that door, Felix, so help me God I'll get that gun out of that desk drawer and shoot your goddamn head off."

"You the authority," I said.

"You must have the last damn word every time, mustn't you?" Frank said.

I got quiet. I could see he was mad.

"Ain't it 'bout time you had your dinner?" 'Malia said, to break the silence.

"I eat when I damned well please," Frank said, turning on 'Malia now. "I hope I still have that privilege in my own house." When 'Malia didn't say anything, he said: "Well, aren't you going to say, 'You the authority,' just to have the last word?"

"You know who you is, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said.

"I'm an invalid," he said. "I'm an invalid who everyone laughs at soon as my back is turned."

"I never laughed at you in my life, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said. "And I'm sure Felix never done either."

It got quiet again. I rubbed my hand over my old black cap I had hanging on my knee. Then I just looked at my hands a while. I guess I never would 'a' done that if I was out in the shop or at my own house. But in here, with all these books and furnitures and fine things, I just, all of a sudden, looked at both of my hands. How rough they looked. Knotted, old, hard, and wrinkled.

"How come you didn't protest?" Frank asked 'Malia.

"Protest what, Mr. Frank?"

"Their dragging him back up here, that's what."

"They ain't go'n drag Copper nowhere," she said.

"And why not?"

"I'm sure I don't need to even answer that, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said, with her head down.

"You better answer that, damn you," he said. "And I wish you would look up when I'm talking to you, Amalia."

'Malia stuck the needle in the dress and raised her head.

"Copper both of us nephew, Mr. Frank," she said. "And they know that. And they know ain't nowhere in the world for them to go if they hurt him."

"You and Felix seem to be throwing that nephew stuff pretty heavily round here today," Frank said. "You better

mind your tongue doesn't slip at the wrong time."

"I know my place," 'Malia said.

"Do you?" Frank said. "I thought you had forgotten it. For a moment there, I thought everybody in here was white."

"No sir, I'm not white," she said.

"You sure now?"

"I'm sure, Mr. Frank. You the only white person in here."

"Thank you," he said, nodding his head.

Somebody knocked on the door, and 'Malia told him to come in. Stateman pushed the door open and told Frank his dinner was ready. Frank left the window. A tall, slim man with thin, gray hair. A very weak man; a very sick man.

"Tell that gal to fix up something for Felix in the kitchen," he said to Stateman.

"Yes sir," Stateman said, standing to the side to let Frank go out first.

Frank stopped at the door and looked back at me.

"When you get through eating, you go to that living room and sit down," he said. "Don't you dare leave this house until I see that boy."

"You the authority," I said.

"And you keep remembering that, too," he said, and went out.

Stateman followed him.

"One ain't no better than the other one," 'Malia said. "They the same, that same blood in 'em. Didn't I used to sing at Copper and sing at Copper 'fore he left here. Him fighting them white children on the river like he fight them black ones in the quarter. Didn't I used to sing and sing and sing at him. My singing didn't do no good then; now he's back here doing worse."

"What I can't understand, what Mr. Frank want see him so bad for. If nobody wanted to see me, I sure wouldn't go

through that much trouble to get him in my house."

"He know he's going to die soon," 'Malia said. "He want leave something for Copper in his will. In my name."

"Not this place, I'm sure?"

"Lord, no," 'Malia said. "Something small. Maybe no more than a few dollars."

"To pay for what Walter did to his mon?"

"I reckon so."

"But Copper got to come through the back to get it?"

"Yes," 'Malia said.

"He won't see that day," I said.

"Copper scares me, Felix," 'Malia said.

"How do you mean?"

"Look what he did Little Boy and Joby. Look how he beat them and put them in chains. He would do that to anybody who got in his way. I think he would even do that to me."

"Not to you—no," I said.

"Yes," she said. "To me. Something's in Copper. Something happened to Copper. Things he talk about. Rights. Wrongs. Soldiers. Generals. Who the earth for. Who the sun belongs to. That kind of talk scares me, Felix."

"Maybe he'll hurry up and go back," I said.

"I hope so," she said. Then she lowered her head and started crying. "My own blood—I want my own blood to leave my house."

I went to her and put my hand on her shoulder. I started to tell her it wasn't her blood making Copper act like that, but I didn't know if that was the thing to say then.

"Let's go eat something," I told her. "You ought to be hungry, too."

She stood up, and we went back in the kitchen.

8: When I finished eating, I went to the living room and sat down. It was a big room with big, old, dark furnitures. They had all the curtains drawn back, but still there wasn't enough light in there. The trees in the yard kept sun from ever getting into that house. I sat in a big, old, high-back chair, facing the fireplace. No matter where you looked in the room, you saw pictures of the family. Pictures of soldiers everywhere—probably from all the wars. There was a picture of Greta Jean standing in front of the house with two young men on both sides of her. She looked happy as she could be, because she knowed she was going to get this place after Frank died. On the mantelpiece was a picture of Walter on that stallion, Black Terror. And how I remember them two. I remembered how he used to race that horse through the quarters and how the people had to fall out his way when they heard him coming. I remembered how he used to pick fights with the colored boys in the field for no reason at all—just for the sake of fighting them. And the women, married or single—what did he care? They was on his place and they belong to him. And nobody, white or black, would dare tell him he was wrong. It took that horse he loved to stop him. One day, just before a storm, he rode the horse back in the field. Something scared the horse—probably a clap of thunder—and the horse threw him from the saddle. But he never got his foot out of the stirrup, and the horse dragged him all the way to the front. I still remembered how I heard that horse's hoofs pounding that hard ground, coming back to the yard. Will Henderson saw him first and started hollering: "Head him. Head him. He dragging Mr. Walter. Head him." We stopped the horse, all right, but by the time we got Walter loose from the stirrup, he was already dead. His back and his skull, both broke.

For a long time, I couldn't take my eyes off that picture.

But I wasn't thinking about Walter and that horse; I was thinking about that other one running round in the quarters, calling himself a General and a Laurent. "They the same two," I told myself. "It's Walter back."

I had been in the room a good half an hour when Frank came in. Then I saw what had kept him so long: he had changed clothes. He had put on a pair of gray pants, a white shirt, and a little polka-dotted bow tie. To get dressed up like that had taken all the little strength he had. He looked so weak and white now, I thought he was going to fall before he got to that chair. 'Malia came in a few minutes later with her sewing and sat by a lamp in the corner. She still had the white rag on her head. Long time ago, all the house servants had to wear a rag on their heads all the time. But now the people in the big houses didn't make them do it unless they wanted to. 'Malia still did it, just like she had done it thirty, forty years back.

Nobody said anything to anybody. 'Malia was sewing and humming a song to herself. I couldn't hear all of the song, just a word now and then. I had hung my old leather cap on my knee, and I passed my hand over the cap every time I caught Frank looking over there at me. Frank took out his watch and glanced at the time.

"Maybe they had to tree him," he said.

Then it got quiet again. I didn't feel right at all in there. I wanted to get back to my shop and sharpen up something. A man used to the outside don't feel right cooped up in a house when he know the sun is shining.

"Well?" Frank said.

I looked at him, but I didn't answer him. I didn't know what he was talking about.

"Do you think they had to tree him?"

"Not if he treed them," I said.

"Don't underestimate J. W.," Frank said. "Not the way he went out of here with blood in his eyes."

I nodded my head.

"I see you have little confidence in J. W.," Frank said. "Don't you think he's tough?"

"Yes sir," I said. "He's real tough."

"Sure, he's tough," Frank said. "I'll bet you you couldn't find a man anywhere tougher than J. W."

I passed my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. All the time, 'Malia was over there sewing and humming her church song to herself.

"Five to one, J. W. brings him in," Frank said.

"Sure," I thought. "Sure. But that's not the reason you put on that white shirt and them gray pants."

9: Then we heard it—that yellow gal saying, "Lord, don't tell me I got to start all over again." Then it was quiet for about a second before somebody knocked on the door loud and quick. The kind of loudness and quickness that said, "If you don't hurry up and tell me come in, I'm coming in, anyway."

"Come in," 'Malia said.

But J. W. was already in. In, walking fast, breathing hard. His white shirt was soaking wet. From the collar of the shirt to the cuff of his pants, his clothes was covered with stickers, cucumberburrs, beggar-lice, tar vine leaves, corn silk, and any other grass seed in the field you cared to name. He had to go by me to get to Frank, and I saw how his face was all cut up. The cuts was too thin to come from a knife or a razor, so I figured they had been made by corn leaves and cane leaves.

"He's crazy," J. W. said, even while he was still walking. J. W. wasn't walking the way you walk in a room; he took the long strides you took in the road—like you was trying to make

it home before the rain caught you. "There's no doubt—I'm fully convinced he's crazy. Crazy, crazy, crazy. I mean absolutely crazy. Pure-de crazy." He stopped in front of the chair where Frank was sitting. "Yes sir, Mr. Frank, he's crazy." He turned to 'Malia who was sitting by the lamp looking at him. 'Malia wasn't looking at him like she was mad at him for going after Copper, and then coming back calling Copper crazy; she looked at him like she felt pity for him. Pity because she could see that no matter what had happened in the quarters or back in the fields, J. W. had got the worse of it. "Don't mean to say nothing 'gainst your kin at all, Miss Amalia," he said. "Done knowed you all my life, done respected you all my life. But"—he turned to Frank—"that boy crazy. No concern for human beings at all. They don't mean no more to him than a dog or a snake. Not even a good dog, not even a good one. Crazy. Crazy." He jerked his head toward 'Malia again. "I'm sorry, Miss Amalia." Then he jerked his head back toward Frank. "But he crazy, Mr. Frank."

J. W. stopped talking long enough to draw breath and swallow, and all that time Frank was looking at him like he wasn't surprised at all. Looking at him like he had figured that this might happen—like he had already told himself what he had to do if it did happen. That's why he had put on the starched white shirt and the gray pants.

"Crazy 's he can be," J. W. started right where he had left off. "No concern for human beings at all. "Now, guess what he done done?"

Frank squinted up at J. W. and shook his head a little, to show him he didn't have the least idea what had happened.

"Nearly 'bout killed half of them boys you suntu me with," J. W. said.

"But he didn't get you?" Frank said, squinting up at him and passing his fingers lightly over his chest.

"Sir? No sir. Only 'cause I was standing a little to the side," J. W. said. "But you ought to see what he did Pool-Doo and Crowley."

"Pool-Doo and Crowley?" Frank said. "What did he do Pool-Doo and Crowley, made them tickle each other half to death?"

"Sir? No sir. It wasn't no tickling—no sir. He just cracked both of them side the head with that little scy' blade handle. I mean hard as he could, Mr. Frank. Hard as he possibly could."

"Where did he got a scythe blade handle from?" Frank asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Frank, but he had it. A brand new one—like it hadn't left the store, yet. Could still see the label."

"You saw the label, but you didn't get close enough for him to crack you side the head?"

"Sir? No sir. I was standing to the side. And guess what he did poor Simon? I'm sure you have no idea what he did that poor boy."

While Frank was trying to guess what Copper did Simon, J. W. wiped the sweat from his face and caught two or three quick breaths of air.

"What did he do Simon?" Frank asked.

"Sir? What he did? He made that poor boy jump in a ditch—a ditch full of yellow jackets—yellow jackets, Mr. Frank."

"I suppose Simon jumped out again?"

"Yes sir. Yes sir. Poor boy. All stung up, all stung up."

Frank passed his hand lightly over his chest again.

"Go on," he said.

"I don't know what happened to Cadilac and Grease."

"Cadilac and Grease?" Frank said.

"Yes sir. Last thing I seen, they was headed toward the

swamps running and hollering. I don't know if they got lost back there or if they fell in the bayou and drowned. The way they was running, they wasn't looking too close where they was going."

J. W. had been talking fast, and now he had to wipe his face and catch his breath again. While Frank was waiting for J. W. to go on, Frank passed his fingers over his chest. He didn't rub hard, just lightly—like even those little light touches was enough to keep his heart beating.

"I honestly think that boy's crazy, Mr. Frank," J. W. started again. "I swear, I honestly do. 'Cause a sane person wouldn't dare act like that—not a sane one." He looked at 'Malia sadly. He was sorry for her for having a crazy nephew on her hands. He turned to Frank again. "Back there checking on everything. Oak trees, pecan trees, berry bushes. Even caught him counting the joints in a stalk of cane."

"Did he look at the cotton?" Frank said.

"Sir? Yes sir. That too."

"Corn?"

"Sir? Corn too. Everything. Everything you can name, he looked at it. Checking them and writing them down in that little tablet. Last thing I seen, he was shelling a yer of corn in his hand and tasting the grains."

Frank sat back in the chair and squinted up at J. W. a long time. J. W. wiped the sweat from his face again. He was still breathing pretty hard; I could see the back of his shoulders going up and down.

"How did you get that shirt so wet—you stopped for a swim before you got back here?" Frank asked.

"Sir? No sir. Just running full speed," J. W. said. "'Cross cane rows, corn rows, cotton rows—jumping ditches—to tell you what happened."

"All right, you told me; you can leave."

"Yes sir," J. W. said, turning away. Then he stopped and

looked at Frank again. "Yes sir, he told me to tell you, 'When a General ain't got no more army, ain't but one thing for him to do.'"

Frank nodded. "Did he say where he would be?"

"No sir. He just said, 'When a General ain't got no more army, ain't but one thing for him to do.'"

"Go on," Frank said. "Wait. Go back in the field and round up the rest of those worthless niggers; bring them up here so that gal can look after them."

"Yes sir," J. W. said. "Thank you, sir. I'm sure they'll 'preciate that."

J. W. went out, wiping his face and walking fast. Not the way you walk out of a room—the way you walk down the road when you was trying to get home before the rain caught you.

"Felix?" Frank said.

"Yes sir?" I said, getting up from the chair.

"Go back in the quarters and get me everything that can walk or crawl."

"That's about it," I said. "Unless you mean Aunt Jude, Aunt Johnson, and the rest of them. But being in their seventies and eighties and can't back-paddle fast as J. W., I wouldn't want send them on Copper. Not the way he's swinging that little scy' blade handle."

"How about dogs?" Frank said.

"Few of them down there, but putting them all together, I doubt if they'd 'mount to one good one," I said. "And the way Copper's swinging that little scy' blade handle, you'll need at least six or seven. Now, the Cajuns there got some good ones. I'm sure they wouldn't mind lending them to you. We ain't had a good lynching in a long time; they probably wouldn't mind going themselves to get him."

"You through, Felix?"

"Yes sir."

"How long do you think they'll let him live if I let him force his way through that front door? Have you thought about that?"

"Can't you let him slip in tonight sometime?"

"Slip in?" Frank said. "Don't you know slipping in to him is the same as coming in through the back?"

I nodded. "I reckon so."

"Even if they didn't lynch him, I wouldn't let him come in through that front door," Frank said. "Neither him, nor you, nor her over there. And to me she is only the second woman I've had the good fortune of knowing whom I can call a lady. But she happens to be black, Felix, and because she's black she'll never enter this house through that door. Not while I'm alive. Because, you see, Felix, I didn't write the rules. I came and found them, and I shall die and leave them. They will be changed, of course; they will be changed, and soon, I hope. But I will not be the one to change them."

He turned to look at 'Malia.

"You crying over there, Amalia?" he asked her.

She shook her head, but she wouldn't look up.

"Yes," Frank said. "If he won't come here, then I must go there. I need some fresh air. I've been in here too long."

"Mr. Frank," 'Malia said, getting up and coming to him. "Don't go down there fooling with Copper. If anybody must go, let me go again."

"No, you stay here," Frank said. "It's me he wants. Can't you see it's me?"

"Don't go down there, Mr. Frank," 'Malia said. "Please, don't go down there."

"I must go, Amalia," Frank said. "I can't let Copper in here."

"And your heart?" she said. She was crying; the water had run down her face to her chin.

Frank stood there looking down at her.

"Poor Amalia," he said. "We all hurt you, don't we, Amalia? Don't worry, I'll be careful. He won't kill me that easily." He turned to me. "I'll have to get my cane and my coat. You must be properly dressed when meeting a General. Meet me in the back; we'll go in the car. You'll have to drive, Felix."

He went out. I put my arm round 'Malia's shoulders and led her back to the chair. She sat there crying. I tried to talk to her, but she was crying too much to answer me.

I left the room, thinking, "Poor woman, poor woman." If it wasn't one of them hurting her, it was the other. Walter did it when he messed up with her niece; the gal did it when she took the boy North; and here was the boy back, hurting her just like his mon and his paw had done before.

**10:** By the time I had backed the car from under the house, Frank had come down the back stairs. He looked even sicker and weaker. I'm sure if he wasn't using that walking cane he wouldn't 'a' been able to stay on his feet. I held the door open to let him get in the car. Then after he had set himself good, I shut the door and went and got in on the driver's side. We had to drive under the trees to reach the gate. Frank looked out of the window at the trees. It had been a long time since he had been out of that house.

"Felix, why didn't they bring Copper in?" he asked, turning to me. "They didn't want to?"

"They couldn't, Mr. Frank."

"Why? Because he's a Laurent?"

"No sir, that's not it. They couldn't 'a' brought back anybody who didn't want to come."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because it's not like it used to be, Mr. Frank. They not

scared of you like they was scared of Mr. Walter. They knowed you wasn't going to do them anything. They knowed Mr. Walter would 'a' half killed them, and they would 'a' done anything in the world before they came back there empty-handed."

"So it's fear that makes them move?"

"No, sir, not exactly. Fear make them move when that's all they ever knowed. But when you lose the power of the rod, of the gun, they ain't got nothing to fear no more."

"I see; they fear the other man who picks up the rod or the gun."

"Yes sir, that's who they fear then."

"Do you think the time might come when they would join up with Copper against me?"

"That I don't know, Mr. Frank."

"Would you, Felix?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm old, Mr. Frank. I don't have too much time left to be joining up with anybody. Another thing, I don't believe in joining up with anybody from fear; I do what I do from respect."

"Do you respect what Copper's doing?"

"Well, I look at it this way: I don't like to see him hurting his aunt like he's doing. But I don't know if I wouldn't slap a few of them up side the head, too, if they came for me like they went for him."

"Then you don't think it's wrong what he's doing?"

"Like I said, Mr. Frank, I don't like to see what he's doing to his aunt."

"Well, how about what he's doing to me?"

"I don't know if he's doing anything, Mr. Frank, Mr. Walter wouldn't 'a' done."

"Walter would have done it," Frank said. "But not Copper's mon. And there is the difference, Felix. And that's why it's wrong."



We was already in the quarters. Far as you could see was nothing but this long road of white dust. It hurt your eyes to look at so much dust, so much whiteness, so much heat rising up from it. It was the hottest part of the day—between one thirty and two—and there wasn't another person anywhere in sight. The tall blood weeds on both sides of the road made the place look even hotter. We was coming up to 'Malia's house. I could see two chairs on the gallery. They wasn't there when I came down the quarters the first time.

"He's waiting for me," Frank said. "Stop the car."

"He made it from the field that quick?"

"He's there," Frank said. "Stop."

I stopped and we looked at the house. Copper didn't show up. Just the two chairs on the gallery facing the road. I mashed on the horn, but he still didn't show up.

"Want me to go and knock?" I asked Frank.

"He's there," Frank said.

I mashed on the horn again, and we waited. About a minute later, Copper came to the door. He had taken off his shirt, and he had a white towel hanging over his shoulder. Me and Frank both looked at him a long time.

"He doesn't look much like a General from here," Frank said. "But I suppose no General looks like a General with his shirt off." He twisted his mouth a little to the side, then he nodded his head and grunted. "Yes, he does look like Walter. Yes."

"Come here, Copper," I called.

He came a little farther out on the gallery, then he stopped again. He just wanted to make sure who was out there.

"You don't think he's coming down those steps, do you?" Frank said.

"Copper? Come here," I said.

"Save your breath," Frank said.

He mashed on the door handle and got out before I could get out and help him. I jumped out on my side and opened the gate. The tall, sick, white man went in the yard with his head high. Copper stood there wide-legged, with his chest out, with his hands on his hips, and watched Frank come up the steps. Frank stood before Copper, leaning on the cane and breathing hard. A few drops of sweat had already settled on his forehead. It had taken everything out of him to come up those steps.

"Uncle," Copper said. They stood face to face. They was about the same height—maybe Frank was a little taller. "I don't see my aunt," Copper said.

"I made her stay at the house," Frank said.

"You *made* her stay there, huh?"

Then they just stood there looking at each other. You could see Frank wanted to raise that cane and bring it down on Copper's head or his shoulder. But he didn't have the strength to do it. And even if he had, he probably wouldn't 'a' done it then. What he wanted more than anything else, now, was to find out what Copper was doing here.

Copper had said "Uncle" to Frank just like he would 'a' said "Aunt" to 'Malia. It was like he had been calling him that all his life. He was no more scared of Frank than Frank was scared of him. They was both Laurents. A Laurent wasn't supposed to be scared of any man.

"Please sit down, Uncle," Copper said.

Frank still wouldn't move for a while. You didn't ask a Laurent to sit down, just like you didn't ask him to stand up or shut his mouth. The Laurents moved when they wanted to move. But once he had gone to that chair, I could see how glad he was to sit down. To get dressed, to come down the stairs at the big house, to come up the steps here had taken everything out of him.

"I'm sorry you found me like this," Copper said, "but I

had just come in from the field. Would you like a glass of ice water while I change clothes? I also have some lemonade there."

"Water is fine," Frank said.

"Get some water," Copper said to me.

He didn't talk to me like he was talking to a' old man, he spoke to me like he was speaking to a slave. I went back in the kitchen to get the water. On my way back I met him coming in the house. I had to step out his way to keep him from walking over me. I'm sure he didn't see me at all. He was looking at something far away, or like he was listening to something far away. If you've seen people walking in their sleep, that's the way he looked.

I went out on the gallery and handed Frank the glass of water.

"I used to come here when I was a young man," he said, after he had drunk. "I used to sit on those steps. That mulberry tree there is old as I am."

"I remember it from 'way back," I said.

"I never thought I'd ever sit here again," Frank said.

He looked at all the things round him, then he finished drinking the water and handed me the glass.

Copper came back on the gallery a few minutes later. He had put on more khakis. Not the cheap khakis people wore in the field—the good kind officers wore in the Army. He had on another pair of shoes. They shined better than the other pair did this morning. He stood in the door a second before he came over to the bannister and sat down. He sat a little to the right of Frank's chair. I stood near the steps and leaned back against the post.

"You have two chairs there," Frank said. "Aren't you going to sit down?"

"The bannister is perfectly all right," Copper said. "The other chair was for my aunt."

"Well, she's at the house," Frank said.

"Yes, you *made* her stay there," Copper said.

"Can Felix sit in the chair?"

"Would you have let Felix sit on the gallery at your house?"

"He was sitting in my living room just before we came here," Frank said.

"I'm sure he was," Copper said. "Was he sitting in the living room yesterday? Will he sit there tomorrow?"

"No," Frank said.

They looked at each other like two rams locking horns. But Frank wasn't mad with Copper now; he was just playing round with words. He had caught his breath and had even gotten a little color in his face.

Frank raised the walking cane and tapped the bannister two or three inches away from where Copper was sitting. Copper looked straight at Frank all the time. I said he was looking at Frank, I didn't say he was seeing Frank; because even when he was looking at you, even when he was talking to you, it looked like he was listening to something 'way off.

"What do you want, boy?" Frank asked Copper.

"My birthright," Copper said.

Now, Frank sat 'way back in the chair. He rested one of his arms, his left arm, on the arm of the chair. Then he squinted up at Copper. He had heard Copper quite well, but he didn't believe what he had heard.

"Your what?" he said.

"My birthright," Copper said, looking straight at him.

"That nigger of mine told me he thought you were crazy," Frank said.

Copper didn't say anything, but he never took his eyes off Frank.

"Well?" Frank said.

"What do you think?" Copper said.

"I think he's a good judge of character," Frank said.

Copper raised his hand to his left temple. But I noticed just before he touched his face, his mind drifted away a moment. He didn't rub his temple, he touched it lightly—the way Frank touched at his chest every so often.

"You know anything about the history of this country, boy?" Frank asked him.

"I know a little history," Copper said.

"Then you know because your mon was black you can't claim a damn thing. Not only birthright, you can't even claim a cat."

"Maybe I can't claim my birthright today," Copper said. "But I'll claim it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Frank said.

Copper nodded. "Tomorrow."

"How do you expect to perform that miracle?"

"No miracle, Uncle," Copper said. "My men and I'll just do it."

"Your men?"

"My men."

"And who are these men, Copper?"

"The name is Christian, Uncle," Copper said. "Laurent. Christian Laurent. General Christian Laurent."

"Who are these men, General?" Frank said.

"All those who've been treated as I've been treated," Copper said. (When Copper was talking to you, he wasn't seeing you, he was seeing something 'way off.) He touched at his temple again. Frank watched his hand go up and come back down. "There are many just like me. So many just like me," he said.

Frank let his eyes shift from Copper's face down to his clothes. His khakis was starched and ironed; his shoes shined like new tin.

"Copper," Frank said, leaning closer toward him, "you're

insane, aren't you, boy? There aren't any men, are there?"

"The name is Christian, Uncle."

"There aren't any men, are there, Christian?"

"Yes and no," Copper said. "Spiritually, yes, and they're waiting for me. Physically, in the sense of an organized Army, no."

"How do you know that your imaginary Army will ever materialize, Christian?"

"Just smell the air, Uncle."

Frank looked at Copper a while, like he was letting all this soak in. Then he raised his head and took a deep breath.

"No, I don't smell a thing," he said. He turned to me. "You, Felix?"

I didn't answer him. I didn't believe in getting in kin-folks' squabbles. They always turned against *you* in the end.

"It's there, Uncle," Copper said. "Only a fool, and a damn one at that, can't smell what's in the air."

I looked at Frank and I saw a little color shoot out of his face. He probably would 'a' had another heart attack if anybody else had called him a damn fool; but Copper had said so much already, to hear Copper call him a damn fool didn't shock him too much.

"Any more water in that glass, Felix?" he asked me.

"No sir; I'll get some."

I hurried inside and got the water and hurried back. Frank drank a little and handed me the glass. I moved back against the post.

Frank tapped the bannister with the walking cane and looked up at Copper.

"And you're the General?" he said.

"I am the General," Copper said.

"Suppose I kill this General, which I can do as easily as snapping my fingers, then what?"

"You won't kill this General, or you would have done it

before now, Uncle," Copper said. "And that's a grave mistake, not killing him. But even if you did kill this General, another General would only spring up."

"Not on my place, claiming birthright," Frank said.

"If not on your place claiming birthright, then on somebody else's place claiming birthright," Copper said. "It was not only on your place he was denied his birthright. That's been denied him all over this country."

"I see you have the answers, General," Frank said.

"That's why I am a General, Uncle," Copper said.

Frank squinted up at Copper a second, then he sat back in the chair and sniffed at the air again. Copper raised his left hand and rubbed his finger lightly over his temple. For a second there, his mind drifted away from him again. He might 'a' been listening to something far off.

"You know, you almost killed half of my men on this place," Frank said.

Copper had been looking at Frank, but he had been thinking about something else. Frank woke him out of a dream.

"Men?" he said.

Frank nodded. "Men."

"Since when have you started calling them men, Uncle?" Copper asked.

Frank didn't answer him then; he squinted up at Copper a while. "So that's why you did it?" he said.

"When they act like men, I'll treat them like men." Copper said. "When they let you make them act like animals, then I'll treat them like animals."

"I see," Frank said. "You're going to change it all. You, one, are going to change what's been drilled into their brains the past three hundred years? You, one?"

"That's my intention," Copper said.

"Using chains and sticks?" Frank asked him.

Copper didn't answer him then; he let Frank think about what he had said. Then I saw this slow grin coming on Copper's face.

"Did you say chains and sticks—Uncle?" he said.

"Yes."

"I thought you said chains and sticks," Copper said. "I thought I heard you right."

He didn't go on for a while; he wanted Frank to think some more.

"Those are your creations, Uncle—the chains and sticks. You created them four hundred years ago, and you're still using them up to this day. You created them. But they were only a fraction of your barbarity—Uncle. You used the rope and the tree to hang him. You used the knife to castrate him while he struggled with the rope to catch his breath. You used fire to make him squirm even more, because the hanging and the castration still wasn't enough amusement for you. Then you used something else—another creation of yours—that thing you called law. It was written by you for you and your kind, and any man who was not of your kind had to break it sooner or later. . . . I only used a fraction of your creations. You have imbedded the stick and the chain in their minds for so long, they can't hear anything else. I needed it to get their attention. I think I have it now—and I won't have to use it any more. From now on I'll use the simplest words. Simple words, Uncle; a thing you thought they would never understand."

All the time Copper was talking, he kept his voice calm and even. But it was a strain for him, just like it was a strain for him to sit in one place. I don't mean he was squirming round on the bannister; but you had the feeling he might 'a' jumped up from there any moment. I noticed once how his

mind drifted away, stayed away for a while, before it came back again.

Frank put the palm of his hand on the end of the walking cane and pressed it against the floor. If this was out in the yard, the point of the cane would 'a' made a slight hole in the ground. He squinted up at Copper. He was like a lawyer in the courtroom. Maybe the other lawyer had said something that was the truth, and maybe he felt like telling the lawyer he had said some true things, but that wasn't going to change his feelings at all.

"That nigger of mine told me you had a notebook," he said. "What were you doing, mapping out plans for battle?"

"Just making a few notes on the place," Copper said. He could see Frank was trying to play with him, but he didn't mind this at all. Because everything he said, himself, he meant it. "The condition of the houses, the crops, the fertility of the land," he said.

"And what do you think of the place?" Frank said, looking at the little mulberry tree, not at Copper.

But when he did that he forgot Copper was a Laurent. He thought Copper was going to answer him like I would 'a' answered him, or like one of his sharecroppers had to answer him. Copper just sat there, looking down at him in that extra calm way he possessed. Frank kept on looking at the tree, waiting. But when the answer didn't come, I could see his eyes shifting down the tree near the ground. He wasn't seeing the tree now, he was waiting for something, a sound or something, to make him face Copper again. Since he had turned his head from Copper, he needed something to make him turn back. That was supposed to be my job, I reckoned, but I wasn't getting in it. Let him get out of it the best way he could. After a while, he looked back on his own.

"The land has been wasted and is still being wasted, but it's not beyond saving," Copper said. If he took what Frank

had done as a' insult, he wasn't showing it. "As for the houses, they'll have to be torn down and built from the ground up," he said.

"Corn?" Frank said. "That nigger told me you ate a few grains of my corn back there."

"I did," Copper said. "Most of it is bad. Not terrible, but it could be better."

"Cotton?" Frank said.

"It can be improved."

"Cane?" Frank said.

"Same as the cotton and corn."

"Hay?" Frank said.

"Yes."

"Berries?" he said.

Copper nodded.

"Did you get into the swamps?"

"I would have," Copper said. "But I was being continually interrupted."

"J. W. and Little Boy?" Frank said.

"Was that their names?"

"Yes," Frank said, "that was their names."

"They didn't introduce themselves," Copper said.

Frank poked the cane in the floor again. If this was out in the yard, it would 'a' made a hole in the ground 'a' inch deep. He squinted up at Copper.

"When did this birthright notion come into your head?" he asked.

You could see in Copper's face how his mind went and came back. He was looking at Frank one second and seeing him; then the next second he was seeing something 'way off.

"I always knew who my father was," he said, keeping his voice level. Now his mind had drifted 'way again. He made a painful frown, and I saw the left side of his face trembling.

"But I knew I couldn't say a thing about it. It would have gotten me in trouble, and probably gotten my mother in more trouble. Then one day in the field we were picking up potatoes. I had gone to the bayou to get some water out of the barrel. When I came back to the row where my mother and I were working, she wasn't there. I asked where she was, and a woman—I forget who she was—started laughing at me. I walked away crying, looking for my mother. I found them in another patch of ground, Walter Laurent on top of her. They didn't see me, but that night I told her one day I was going to kill him. That's why we moved from here. Her, her husband and me. Her husband's name was the name I carried up until recently."

Copper raised his hand up to his face to touch both of his temples. I could see him frowning behind his hand.

"Two years after we left here, my mother died," Copper went on. He was looking at Frank, but he wasn't seeing him; he was seeing past Frank. Like he was talking to Frank, but at the same time listening to another voice. "My suppose-to-be father, who had been too nutless to say I wasn't his while we lived in the South, kicked me out of the house before my mother was cold in her grave. He was not going to support any white man's child. He was tired supporting a white man's child. I was fourteen years old then. A fourteen-year-old black child out on his own. Not a soul in the world to turn to, not one."

He stopped and looked down at Frank again. Frank wasn't looking at him now; he had folded his hands over the end of the walking cane and he had propped his chin on his hands. Even when Copper had quit talking, even when he knowed Copper was looking down at him, he kept his head bowed.

"For the last ten years I've been everywhere," Copper said, looking at the trees over in the other yard—looking at

them, but not seeing one of them. "I've seen a little bit of everything in this world, but suffering more than anything else. There're millions just like me. Maybe not my color, but without homes, without birthrights, just like me. And who is to blame?" he said, looking down at Frank. "Men like my father. Men like Walter Laurent."

Frank raised his eyes to look at him. He didn't move his chin from his hands. He looked at Copper long and carefully, then he looked down again.

"Rapists," Copper said. "Murderers, plunderers—and they hide behind the law. The law they created themselves."

He got up from the bannister and went to the other end of the gallery. I saw him looking across the yard toward the big house. I saw him raising both of his hands and pressing them hard against his face.

"The suffering, the suffering, the suffering," he said.

He rubbed his face hard, and just looked at that house a long time. I watched him, but Frank didn't. He kept his head bowed, his chin resting on his hands. He didn't even look up when Copper came back to the bannister.

"I've been in all the cities," Copper said. He was calm again—but he was too calm. "Yes, and I've been in prison. How many times have I heard weeping in those cells. How many times did they make me scrub the blood off the floor. Once, just to show me what it looked like, they made me clean the chair. I found a strain of hair, a long, brown strain of hair. I kept it for a while, then I lost it. It didn't matter. I didn't need a strain of hair to remind me of the horror I had seen." He stopped and looked down at his uncle. "But why?" he said. "Why? What have we done? We didn't even ask to be born. I, myself, was conceived in a ditch. . . . And now . . . day and night . . . day and night . . . day and night . . ." He stopped. He had to wait till his mind came back again. "Why these washed-out eyes, these distorted minds, these nonfunc-

tioning brains? Why do I see the faces and hear the cries still? Not powerful cries—little whimpers, like mice in a trap. In a crowd or alone, their cries are with me." He threw his head back. "Clinging to me, won't let me be free," he screamed. He stopped again; he pressed both of his hands against the sides of his face. He was looking down at his uncle. He was seeing him, he wasn't seeing him. For a second, there, he felt sorry for his uncle; looked like he wanted to cry. He made a deep frown; his mouth trembled, the way a man trembles just before he cries. But, then, he remembered he was a General, and the same General who couldn't go through that back door couldn't cry either. "I used to pray once," he said. He was calm again—too calm. "I used to pray and pray and pray. But the same God I was praying to was created by the same ones I was praying against. And Gods only listen to the people who create them. So I quit my praying—there would have to be another way. I remembered that I had a father who had property, and I remembered that I was his oldest son. I would take that property—my share of that property—and I would share it with those others who were like me."

He stopped and looked down at the floor. He looked very tired. Sweat had broke out on his face, and even his starched khaki shirt was wet round the armpit. Frank raised his head slowly and looked at Copper.

"So you made yourself a General?" he said.

"The world made me a General," Copper said. "But you wouldn't know what that means, would you?"

"Hardly," Frank said. "I've had it easy all my life. I've never heard anyone cry; I've never seen any washed-out eyes. Never seen anybody sick."

"No, not the way I have," Copper said. "Because you've always been in a position to give them a dime. Dimes clear all conscience."

Frank sat back in the chair—with his walking cane on the

right side of the chair, with his arm resting on one of the chair arms, with his legs stretched out, with his head back—looking up at Copper.

"J. W. is a good judge of character," he said. "You are insane, boy. As insane as anyone has ever been. To think you can carry the burden of this world on your shoulders is not an original idea. That idea is old as man's idea of justice—probably as old as man himself. Since the beginning of civilization he has tried to do exactly what you want to do, but since it was as insane then as it is now, he has failed. My brother, your father, was wrong. Not only with your mother, but with many other women—white and black alike. White and black men he also destroyed. Destroyed them physically, destroyed them mentally. I, myself, have suffered from his errors as much as you, as much as any other man has, but I—"

"You have not suffered," Copper said.

"Shut up when I'm talking," Frank said. "I listened to you."

Copper slid away from the bannister real slowly and stood right in front of the chair. For a moment I thought he was going to jerk Frank out of there and slam him against the wall. Because, if he had done it, it wouldn't 'a' surprised me at all. Frank looked up at Copper when he stood up. He wasn't scared of Copper; he didn't even get a tighter grip on the cane. He challenged Copper a while, just looking at him, then he nodded. I supposed he re'lized he wasn't being a gentleman.

"Don't talk to me like that ever again," Copper said. "I'm not one of your niggers running round in the quarters. I'm not one your Cajun sharecroppers. Whether you like it or not, I'm a Laurent. I'm a Laurent, Uncle, and you better remember it."

"My apologies—Nephew," Frank said. "Now, shall I go on?"

Copper didn't say any more, but he didn't sit down either. He just stood there, looking down at Frank.

"I was saying I've suffered as much as you've suffered," Frank said. "He's destroyed your mind, he's destroyed my body. I don't know how much more time I have. Maybe a year, maybe a month, maybe only another day. But as long as I'm here I'm going to do all I can to make up for what he did to these here in the quarters. I'm going to give them shelter and food, medicine when they're sick, a place to worship God. When they die, I'm going to give them a little plot of ground in which to be buried." He sat up a little in the chair and squinted up at Copper. "General Christian Laurent, I'm going to defend this place with all my strength. I'm going to defend it with my dying breath—to keep it exactly as it is. And if you come back here again, alone or with your Army, before the law of the land has been changed to give you those 'birthrights' you've been talking so much about, I would shoot you down the same as I would a mad dog. After I'm dead, laws won't matter to me. You and Greta Jean can fight over this piece of rot as long as you both live. But as long as I can draw breath, it stays as it is. I did not write these rules and laws you've been talking about; I came here and found them just as you did. And neither one of us is going to change them, not singly. Now, those are my last words to you. You can stay here as long as you think it's possible to stay without causing trouble. If you can't live by those rules, then you better get the hell away from here now."

Copper stood there a long time after Frank had finished talking. He even narrowed his eyes and looked down at Frank the way all the Laurents did.

"Are you finished, Uncle?" he said.

Frank didn't answer him. He was looking down the quarters now.

"I'll leave, Uncle," Copper said. "Not because you are

frightening me—that's impossible; nothing frightens me any more. I'll leave because I only came this time to look around. But I'll be back. We'll be back, Uncle. And I'll take my share. I won't beg for it, I won't ask for it; I'll take it. I'll take it or I'll bathe this whole plantation in blood."

He stopped and looked down at Frank. Frank was still looking down the quarters.

"Your days are over, Uncle," he said. "It's my time now. And I won't let a thing in the world get in my way. Nothing..."

"Shall I help you back to the car?"

"I have Felix there," Frank said, without looking at him.

"Then I'll say good day," Copper said. "Tell my aunt I've gone. But tell her I'll come back. And tell her when I do, she'll never have to go through your back door ever again."

He bowed and went inside—walking fast the way soldiers walk.