

CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM McCRANIE, a Negro	
GOLDIE McALLISTER, his sweetheart and later his wife	
MUH MACK, his aunt	
BUD GASKINS) Turpentine
LIJE HUNNEYCUTT) hands for
PUNY AVERY) the Colonel
DOUGLASS McCRANIE, Abraham's son	
EDDIE WILLIAMS)
LANIE HORTON) Students to Abe
NEILLY McNEILL)
COLONEL McCRANIE, a Southern gentleman, once the owner of slaves	
LONNIE McCRANIE, his son	

TIME: The latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth.

PLACE: Somewhere in the South.

SCENES

- SCENE 1: The turpentine woods of eastern North Carolina, summer.
- SCENE 2: In Abraham McCranie's cabin, spring, three years later.
- SCENE 3: The schoolhouse, winter of the same year.
- SCENE 4: A house in Durham, winter, fifteen years later.
- SCENE 5: The same as Scene 2--an autumn evening three years later.
- SCENE 6: On a road near Abraham's cabin, an hour later.
- SCENE 7: The same as Scene 2, about thirty minutes later than Scene 6.

SCENE 1

A turpentine woods somewhere in the southeastern part of the United States many years ago--near a spring at the foot of a hill. The immediate foreground is open and clear save for a spongy growth of grass and sickly ground creepers. In the rear a wide-spreading tangle of reeds, briars, and alder bushes shuts around the spring in a semicircle. At the right front the great body of a pine, gashed and barked by the turpentine farmer's axe, lifts straight from the earth. To the left a log lies rotting in the embrace of wild ivy. Maples, bays, dogwoods and other small trees overrun by tenacious vines raise their leafy tops to shade the spot. Through interstices in the undergrowth one can see the pine forest stretching away until the eye is lost in a colonnade of trees. The newly scraped blazes on the pines show through the brush like the downward spreading beards of old men, suggestive of the ancient gnomes of the woods, mysterious and forever watchful.

At the left front four tin dinner pails hang on a limby bush. The sound of axes against the trees, accompanied by the rhythmically guttural "han-n-h! han-n-n-h!" of the cutters comes from the distance. One of the laborers is heard breaking into a high mournful song --

Oh, my feets were wet--with the sunrise dew,
The morning star--were a witness too.
'Way, 'way up in the Rock of Ages,
Up in God's bosom gwine be my pillow.

Presently there is a loud halloo near at hand, and another voice yodels and cries, "Dinner time--m--m--e! Get your peas, everybody! Voices are heard nearer, a loud burst of laughter, and then three full-blooded Negroes shuffle in carrying long thin-bladed axes, which they lean against the pine at the right. They are dressed in nondescript working clothes, ragged and covered with the glaze of raw turpentine. As they move up to the spring they take off their battered hats, fan themselves, and wipe the streaming sweat from their brows. Two of them are well-built and burly, one stout and past middle age with some pretension to a thin scraggly moustache, the second tall and muscled, and the third wiry, nervous and bandy-legged. They punctuate their conversation with great breaths of cool air.

YOUNG NEGRO

Tell 'bout the fiery furnace--
(Jerking his thumb backward.)
--musta meant these old turpentine woods.

OLDER NEGRO

Yeh, yeh, and us the Hebrew chillun frying in the flame-- while the sweat do roll.

LITTLE NEGRO

That old Saddy night corn liquor frying in you. Hee--hee.

YOUNG NEGRO

(Roughly.)
 Talk, talk, little man!
 (They stand fanning themselves. The little Negro gets down on his belly at the spring.)

LITTLE NEGRO

Mouth about to crack, can drink this spring dry.

OLDER NEGRO

(Slouching his heavy body towards the pool.)
 Hunh, me too. That axe take water same like a saw-mill.
 (He gets down flat and drinks with the other. The water can be heard gluking over the cataracts of their Adam's apples. The younger Negro opens his torn and sleeveless undershirt and stands raking the sweat from his powerful chest with curved hand.)

YOUNG NEGRO

(After a moment.)
 Heigh, Puny, you'n Lije pull your guts out'n that mud-hole and let the engineer take a drink.
 (With a sudden thought of devilment he steps quickly forward and cracks their heads together. Puny starts and falls face foremost in the spring. Lije, slow and stolid, saves himself, crawls slowly up on his haunches and sits smiling good-naturedly, smacking his lips and sucking the water from the slender tails of his moustache.)

LIJE

(Cleaning his muddy hands with a bunch of leaves.)
 Nunh-unh, not this time, my boy.

PUNY

(Scrambling to his feet, strangling and sputtering.)
 Dang your soul, why you push me, Bud Gaskins?

BUD

(A threatening note slipping into his laugh.)
 Here, here, don't you cuss at me, bo.

PUNY

Whyn't you impose on somebody your size? Better try Lije there.
 (Bud gets down and begins drinking.)

LIJE

(Drawling.)
 Don't care if he do. Ducking cool you off.

PUNY

(Helplessly.)
 Always picking at me. Wisht, wisht--

BUD

Here I is lying down. Come on do what you wisht.

(Puny makes no reply but turns off, wiping his face on his shirt sleeve and staring morosely at the ground. Bud gets to his feet.)
Yah, reckon you sail on me and I jam your head in that spring like a fence post and drownd you.

PUNY

(His anger smouldering.)

Talk is cheap, hosscake, cheap!

(Suddenly afraid of his boldness in replying, he turns and looks at Bud in a weak pleading defiance.)

BUD

(Making a frightening movement towards him.)

Mess with me a-jowing and I knock your teeth through your skull.

LIJE

Here, Bud, you let Puny alone.

(He moves over to his bucket, gets it and sits down on the log at the left.)

BUD

(Turning for his bucket with a movement of disgust.)

Sure I ain't gwine hurt him--poor pitiful bow-legs.

(Puny clenches his hands as if stung to the quick, and then beaten and forlorn reaches for his bucket, the weak member of the herd. He throws off his overall jacket, revealing himself stripped to the waist, and sits down at the pine tree.)

LIJE

(Laying out his food and singing.)

'Way, 'way up in the Rock of Ages,
In God's bosom gwine be my pillow.

BUD

(Looking at Puny's bony bust.)

Uhp, showing off that 'oman's breast of your'n, is you? Haw-haw.

PUNY

(In sheer ineffectuality answering him blandly.)
Gwine cool myself.

LIJE

Me too, peoples.

(He loosens his belt, pulls out his shirt-tails, undoes his shirt, and pats his belly.)

Lord, Bud, you sure led us a race this morning on them there boxes. Must have sweat a peck or more.

BUD

(Taking his bucket and sitting on the ground near the center.)

Race? Humh, wait till four o'clock this evening, you gwine call for the calf rope, sure enough.

(Tickled at the tribute to his powers.)

And poor Puny, the heat monkey have rid him to death.

PUNY

Ain't no monkey rid me, I tell you. Little but loud. Be right there when the horn blows.

BUD

Mought, and you slubbering your work. I corners my boxes like the Colonel calls for. You just give 'em a lick and a promise. Ain't it so, Lije?

LIJE

(Swallowing a hunk of bread.)

Dunno, dunno. He do all right, I reckon.

PUNY

Put us in the cotton patch, and I can kill you off the way a king snake do a lizard.

BUD

Picking cotton! That woman and chillun's job. No regular man mess with that.

(Waving his hand at the woods behind him.)

Turpentine's the stuff.

(They fall to eating heartily, peas, side-meat, molasses poured in the top of the bucket lid from a bottle, bread and collards. The axe of a fourth hand is heard still thudding in the forest.)

LIJE

(Jenking his bread-filled hand behind him.)

Whyn't Abe come on? Time he eating.

BUD

Let him rair. Won't hurt hissself a-cutting. Getting to be the no 'countest hand I ever see.

LIJE

Used to could cut boxes like a house a-fire.

PUNY

And hack! Lord, that man could hack.

LIJE

The champeen of the woods and the swamps.

PUNY

Better'n Bud, better'n all. Knowed him to dip eight barrels many day.

BUD

Can't help what has been. Ain't worth my old hat now. Colonel Mack say so too. And I heard Mr. Lonnie talking rough to him over at the weaving house day before yesterday about his getting trifling here lately.

PUNY

Been getting no 'count since two year ago. The time when the white folks hang that Charlie Simpson on a telegram pole--him they said attacked a white 'oman, and they shoot him full of holes, ayh!

BUD

They did. And that Abe got his neck stretched hadn't been for the Colonel. Fool went down there in the night and cut that man down and bury him hisself.

PUNY

Yeh, and Mr. Lonnie was for getting the law on Abe. Ain't no love 'twixt them two.

LIJE

(Looking around him.)

'Twon't do to mess with white folks and they riled up.

BUD

You said it, brother.

PUNY

(Looking around him.)

Won't do. Keep to your work, that's all.

BUD

Yeh, work, work for 'em. Get your money and your meat, push on through, ask no questions, no sass, keep to your work.

LIJE

Yeh, keep the mouth shut, let white man do the talking. Safe then.

BUD

Safe! You done said. No telegram poles, no shooting, no fire burning.

PUNY

Safe is best.

(They lapse into silence under the touch of worry, something undefinable, something not to be thought upon. They swallow their food heavily. Presently Lije stops and looks to the ground.)

LIJE

Abe ain't safe.

BUD

Eyh?

LIJE

(Gesturing vaguely behind him.)

Abe talk too much.

PUNY

(Nodding.)

Can't help it, I bet.

BUD

Can too. Didn't talk much before that boy was hung. Worked hard then and say nothing.

LIJE

Sump'n on his mind. Sump'n deep, worry him, trouble--

BUD

Trouble about the colored folks. Want to rise 'em up with education--fact?

PUNY

Hunh, rise 'em up to get a rope around they neck. The colored's place is down at the bottom. Get buried in his own graveyard, Abe don't mind out.

BUD

Right on the bottom with their hand and legs, muscle power, backbone, down with the rocks and the shovels and the digging. White man on top.

LIJE

You's talking gospel.

PUNY

Abe say he gwine climb. I heared him tell the Colonel that.

BUD

'Fore God! What Colonel say?

PUNY

He ain't say nothing, just look at him.

LIJE

Abe is bad mixed up all down inside.

BUD

White and black make bad mixtry.

LIJE

Do that.

(Thumping on his chest.)

Black down here.

(Thumping his head.)

White mens up here. Heart say do one thing, head say another. Bad, bad.

PUNY

The white blood in him coming to the top. That make him want to climb up and be something. The black gwine hold him down though. Part of him take after the Colonel, part after his muh, division and misery inside.

LIJE

Ssh!

PUNY

(Starting and looking around.)

Colonel Mack the daddy, everybody knows. Like as two peas, see the favor.

BUD

(Bitingly.)

Talk too much! Little bird carry news to the Colonel and he fall on you and scrush you. Ain't black, ain't white what ails him. Them damn books he got to studying last year or two. Can't go to the woods without 'em. Look up there on his bucket, for cripes sake.

(He points to the remaining tin bucket in the bush. A small book is lying on the top under the handle--snorting.)
'Rifmatic, I bet. Give a darky a book and just as well shoot him. All the white folks tell you that.

PUNY

(Pouring molasses on his bread.)

He smart enough though, in his head. That buddy got sense.

LIJE

Has that. Getting so he can cipher right up with the Colonel.

PUNY

(Looking at Bud.)

Bet some day Colonel Mack put him woods boss over us.

BUD

Ain't no blackman gwine boss me, old son. Split his head with my axe.

LIJE

(Leaning back and emitting a halloo.)

Heighp, you Abe! Dinner! Gwine cut all day?

BUD

Give him the full title and he'll hear you.

LIJE

(Grinning.)

Aberham, Aberham McCranie!

PUNY

Yeh, you Aberham Lincoln, you better get your grub!

— (An answering shout comes out of the forest.)

BUD

Trying to cut past time, maybe us'll think he's smart.

PUNY

Don't care what you think, Bud, getting so he look down on you and the rest of us.

BUD

Damn your runty soul, what you know about it? Ain't no darky living can look down on me and get by with it. Do, and I make him smell of that.

(He clenches his heavy fist and raises it to heaven.)

PUNY

Jesus! That Abe take you up in one hand and frail your behind to a blister.

LIJE

What make you two black-guard so much?

BUD

(To Puny.)

Keep on, keep on, little man. Some these days you gwine come missing.
(He crams a handful of cornbread into his mouth.)

LIJE

(Drawling.)

Try a little fist and skull and work the bile out'n your systems.
(Looking off and singing.)

Drak was the night and cold the ground--

BUD

(Spitting in scorn.)

Ain't gwine bruise my fistes on his old skull. Don't 'spect to notice him no more.

(He falls to eating in huge mouthfuls.)

But he better quit throwing that Abe in my face, I tells him that.

PUNY

Don't see why that make you mad.

BUD

It do though. I don't like him and his uppity ways, I don't.

PUNY

Hunh, and you was one of the first to brag on him for going on short rations so the Colonel buy him books and learn him to teach school.

BUD

Short rations. Ain't no short rations, and that Goldie gal bringing him pies and stuff every day. Be here with a bucket in a few minutes, I betcha. Fool love the very ground he squat on! And he look down on her 'cause her ignorant. And teach school! Been hearing that school teaching business the whole year. He ain't gwine teach no school. Colored folks won't send to him, they won't. They don't want no schooling.

PUNY

Mought. Abe told me this morning that the Colonel gwine fix it with the commissioners or something in town today. I know what the matter with you, Bud. Hee-hee.

BUD

What?

PUNY

(Hesitating.)

Abe come riding by in two-horse coach. Us'll be bowing and a-scraping. Us'll pull off our hats and be "Howdy, Mister Aberham."

(Bud turns and looks at him with infinite scorn, saying nothing.)

And Bud?

(Bud makes no answer.)

Bud?

BUD

What?

PUNY

That Goldie business what worrying you, hee-hee. She love Abe and--

BUD

(Bounding up and kicking Puny's bucket and food into the bushes.)
Damn your lousy soul, I'm a mind to stomp you in the dirt!

(He towers over the terrified Puny, who lies flat on his back whimpering.)

PUNY

Don't hit me, Bud. For God's sake! I just joking.

LIJE

Go at it, fight it out.

(Singing to his inner self as he watches them.)
The bones in the grave cried Calvary
The night Kind Jesus died.

BUD

(Kicking dirt at Puny and going back to his bucket.)
Done told him now. Ain't gwine say no more! Next time be my fist
rammed down his throat, and turn him wrong side outwards.

(Abe comes in at the right, carrying his axe. He is a young Negro, with a touch of the mulatto in him, of twenty-five or -six, tall and powerfully built and dressed much like the others in cap and turpentine-glazed clothes. He puts his axe by the pine at the right, pulls off his cap and fans himself, while he pinches his sweaty shirt loose from his skin. His shaggy head, forehead and jaw are marked with will and intelligence. But his wide nostril and a slumbrous flash in his eye that now and then shows itself suggest a passionate and dangerous person when aroused. From the change in the actions of the others when he enters it is evident that they respect and even fear him.)

ABE

What's the trouble between you and Puny, Bud?

BUD

(Sullenly.)
Ain't no trouble.

PUNY

(Crawling around on the ground and collecting his spilled food.)
Ain't nothing, Abe, I just spilled my rations.

(Abe gets his book down and seats himself in the shade at the left. He begins working problems, using a stub of a pencil and a sheet of crumpled paper.)

LIJE

Puny, I got some bread left you can have.

(He pulls a mouth harp from his pocket and begins to blow softly.)

PUNY

(Straightening out his mashed bucket and closing it.)
I don't want nothing else, Lije. Et all I can hold.

(After a moment.)

Put your bucket up for you.

(He gets Lije's bucket and hangs it along with his own in the limby bush. Bud eats in silence, puts up his bucket, gets a drink from the spring, and resumes his seat, hanging his head between his knees. Puny goes to the spring and drinks.)

BUD

(Pouring snuff into his lip.)
Don't fall in and get drownded, Puny.

PUNY

Want some water, Lije?

(He goes to the log, curls himself up in the shade beside it and prepares to sleep.)

LIJE

(Stirring lazily.)

Believe I does.

(He goes to the spring and drinks, returns to the pine tree and sits down.)

PUNY

Ain't you gwine eat no dinner, Abe?
(Abe makes no reply.)

LIJE

Call him again.

(Touching his head with his finger.)

Deep, deep up there.

PUNY

Heigh, Abe, better eat your grub.

ABE

-(Starting.)

You call me?

PUNY

You so deep studying didn't hear me. Better eat your dinner. Get full of ants setting up there.

ABE

I'm going to eat later.

BUD

Yeh, when Goldie come.

ABE

Hunh!

BUD

You heared me.

ABE

Don't let me hear no more.

BUD

Hunh!

ABE

You heard me.

(Puny snickers from his log with audible delight. Lije waits a moment and then lies down. Bud reaches out and tears a bush from the ground and casts it angrily from him.)

I'll eat my dinner when it pleases me, you gentlemen allowing.

(There is a touch of anger in his voice which he apparently regrets on second thought, for he goes on more kindly.)

Goldie said she's going to fetch me something to eat today. I got to work this problem. Been at it two days now. Can't get it out'n my head. Ain't been able to sleep for two nights.

(Bud sits staring and spitting straight before him. Presently Lije begins to snore, then Puny follows. Abe goes on with his figuring. Bud turns over on the ground and goes to sleep. Abe becomes more and more absorbed in the problem he is working. He mutters to himself.)

Answer say fifteen. Can't make it come out fifteen, can't, seem like, to save me. Man must have answer wrong. Six go into fourteen, three, no, two times and--two over.

(His voice dies away as he becomes lost in his work. Presently his face begins to light up. He figures faster. Suddenly he slaps his knee.)

There where I been missing it all the time. I carried two instead of one. Blame fool I is.

(He hits the side of his head with his knuckle. In his excitement he calls out.)

Puny, I'm getting that answer.

(But Puny is snoring away. In a moment he throws down his book with beaming face.)

I got it, folkses, I got it. Fifteen! That white man know what he's doing, he all time get them answer right.

(He turns expectantly towards Lije.)

I got it, Lije.

(Lije makes no answer. He turns towards Puny again, starts to speak but sees he is asleep.)

Bud!

(But Bud makes no answer. The heavy breathing of the sleepers falls regularly upon his ears. His face sinks into a sort of hopeless brooding.)

Yeh, sleep, sleep, sleep your life away. I figger for you, for me, for all the black in the world to lead 'em up out of ignorance. They don't listen, they don't hear me, they in the wilderness, don't want to be led. They sleep, sleep in bondage.

(He bows his head between his knees.)

Sleep in sin.

(Presently.)

Time me to eat.

(He reaches for his bucket and is about to open it when Puny springs high into the air with a squeak of terror, and begins rolling over and over in the leaves and briars.)

PUNY

Come here, folkses, come here and get this thing off'n me.

(He clutches at his breeches. Lije and Bud start up out of their sleep.)

LIJE

Who that run-mad man?

BUD

That damn Puny, something in his britches!

ABE

Be still, Puny, I get it out.

(He goes up to the frightened Puny, reaches down his trousers and pulls out a mouse.)

Nothing but a little bitty old field mice.

(He throws the mouse into the thicket. Lije and Bud break into roaring laughter. Puny sits down exhausted, fanning himself angrily.)

PUNY

Laugh, laugh, all of you. That thing bite same as a mud turtle. Yeh, funny, funny like hell to you.

(He snaps his mouth closed and fans himself the more furiously.

A loud shout comes from off the left.)

ABE

Stop your laughing, I hear somebody hollering.

(A second halloo comes down the hill.)

PUNY

That the Colonel and Mr. Lonnie!

BUD

Sound like 'em. That's who 'tis.

ABE

(Going off at the left.)

Here we is, Colonel Mack, at the spring eating dinner!

(He comes back.)

Colonel Mack and Mr. Lonnie coming on down here.

PUNY

'Course. Got to see how many boxes us cleaned up this morning.

ABE

He tell me about the school now.

(He stirs around him in his excitement.)

Mebbe that his main business here in the middle of the day.

BUD

Hunh, mebbe. Got some special work wants done. Wants to hurry us to it, that's what.

(The sound of voices is heard approaching from the left, and almost immediately the Colonel and his son Lonnie come in. The Colonel carries a riding whip. He is a stout, run-down Southerner; past middle age, with all the signs of moral and intellectual decadence upon him. Lechery, whiskey, and levity of living have taken their toll of him, and yet he has retained a kind of native good-naturedness. His shirt front and once pointed beard are stained with the drippings of tobacco juice. There is something in his bearing and in the contour of his face that resembles Abe. His son, a heavyish florid young man of twenty-three or four, walks behind him.)

COLONEL

(In a high jerky voice.)
Snoozing, hanh?

ABE

Just finishing our dinner, suh.

PUNY

Us about to work over-time today, Colonel.

COLONEL

Not likely, I reckon. Say, I want you fellows, all four of you, to get over to the swamp piece on Dry Creek. Boxes there are running over, two quarts in 'em apiece, prime virgin.

(They begin to move to their feet.)

No, I don't mean to go right now. Gabe's coming by on the big road here--
(Jerking his whip towards the rear.)

--with a load of barrels and the dippers in about a half-hour. Meet him out there.

LONNIE

Yeh, we want to get the wagons off to Fayetteville tonight.

COLONEL

How you get on cornering this morning, Bud?

BUD

Purty good, suh. Us four done about all that pasture piece, suh.

COLONEL

Fine, fine. That's the way. Puny and Lije stay with you?

BUD

Right there every jump.

LIJE

Yessuh, yessuh!

PUNY

When he give the call we give him the response every time, suh.
Yes, suh, us kept him crowded.

COLONEL

We got to get on, Lonnie. Want to see how the scrape's coming over on Uncle Joe's Branch. Be up on the road there in half an hour.

LONNIE

(Stopping as they go out.)

Got so you doing any better work lately, Abe?

ABE

(Starting.)

Suh?

LONNIE

You heard me.

ABE

I didn't understand you, Mr. Lonnie.

LONNIE

You understood me all right.

(Pointing to the book on the ground.)

Let them damned books worry you still?

COLONEL

Come on, Lonnie.

ABE

(Stammering.)

I dunno--I----

COLONEL

Still holding out on short rations, ain't you, Abe?

(There is the least hint of pride in the Colonel's voice.)

ABE

(Somewhat confused.)

I studying what I can. Slow go, slow go.

COLONEL

Stick to it. You're the first Negro I ever saw so determined. But then you're uncommon!

(The Colonel moves on.)

Come on, Lonnie.

ABE

(Following somewhat timidly after him.)

Colonel Mack, did, di--you--what'd they say over there about that little school business?

COLONEL

Bless my soul, about to forget it. I talked it over with the board and most of 'em think maybe we'd better not try it yet.

ABE

(His face falling.)
When they say it might be a good time? I'm getting right along with that 'rithmetic and spelling and reading. I can teach the colored boys and girls a whole heap right now, and I'll keep studying.

COLONEL

(Impatiently.)
Oh, I dunno. Time'll come maybe. Maybe time won't come. Folks are queer things, you know.
(He moves on.)

ABE

Can't you get 'em to let me try it a while? Reckon--

COLONEL

I don't know, I tell you. Got my business on my mind now.

LONNIE

He's done told you two or three times, can't you hear?

ABE

(His eyes flashing and his voice shaking with sudden uncontrollable anger.)
Yeh, yeh, I hear him. Them white folks don't care--they ----

LONNIE

(Stepping before him.)
Look out! None of your sass. Pa's already done more for you than you deserve. He even stood up for you and they laughing at him there in town.

ABE

(Trembling.)
Yeh, yeh, I know. But them white folks don't think-- I'm going to show 'em-- I--

LONNIE

(Pushing himself up before him.)
Dry up. Not another word.

ABE

(His voice breaking almost into a sob.)
Don't talk to me like that, Mr. Lonnie. Stop him, Colonel Mack, before I hurt him.

(The other Negroes draw off into a knot by the pine tree, mumbling in excitement and fear.)

COLONEL

Stop, Lonnie! Abe, don't you talk to my son like that.

LONNIE

By God, I'm going to take some of the airs off'n him right now. You've gone around here getting sorrier and more worthless every day for the last year--sassy to my father. What you need is a good beating, and I'm going to give it to you.

(He steps backward and snatches the whip from his father's hand.)

COLONEL

Stop that, Lonnie!

LONNIE

Keep out of this yourself.

(He comes towards Abe.)

I'll beat his black hide off'n him.

ABE

Keep him back there, Colonel Mack. I mought kill him! Keep him off.

LONNIE

Kill him! All right, do it, damn you!

(He strikes Abe across the face with his whip. With a snarl Abe springs upon him, tears the whip from his hand and hurls him headlong into the thicket of briars and bushes. Then he stands with his hands and head hanging down, his body shaking like one with a palsy.)

PUNY

(Screaming.)

You done killed Mr. Lonnie! Oh, Lordy, Lordy.

COLONEL

(Running to Lonnie who is crawling up out of the mud with his clothes and skin torn, sobbing and cursing.)

Are you hurt? How bad are you hurt?

LONNIE

Let me get at that son of a bitch and I'll kill him dead.

(Moaning.)

Oh, I'll beat his brains out with one of them axes.

COLONEL

Yeh, and you'd better keep your hands off'n him. I'll fix him.

(He reaches down and picks up the whip--thundering.)

Get down on your knees, Abe! Get down, you slave! I'm going to beat you.

(Abe jerks his head up in defiance, but before the stern face of the Colonel his strength goes out of him. He puts his hands up in supplication.)

ABE

Don't beat me, Colonel Mack, don't beat me with that whip!

COLONEL

Get down on your knees! Get down!

(He strikes him several blows.)

ABE

(Falling on his knees.)

Oh, Lord, have mercy upon me!

(The Colonel begins to beat him, blow upon blow. Puny, Bud and Life stand near the pine in breathless anxiety.)

PUNY
The Colonel'll kill him!

BUD
(Seizing his arm.)
Shut that mouth!

COLONEL
(As he brings the whip down.)
Let this be a lesson to you--keep to your place!

ABE
(His back twitching under the whip, his voice broken.)
Mercy, Colonel Mack, mercy!

COLONEL
You struck a white man, you struck my son.

ABE
(Raising his tear-stained face.)
I your son too, you my daddy.
(He throws himself down before him, embracing his feet. The Colonel lowers the whip, then drops it behind him.)

LONNIE
(His voice husky with rage.)
You hear what he say? Hear what he called you?
(He seizes the whip and in a blind rage strikes the prostrate Abe again.)

COLONEL
(Stepping between them.)
Stop it! Give me that whip.
(Lonnie hesitates and then reluctantly hands him the whip.)
Go on back out to the road and wait for me. Trot!
(Lonnie in disgust and rage finally goes off at the left nursing his face in his arms.)
Get up, Abe. Get up, I say.
(Abe sits up, hugging his face between his knees. The Colonel wets his handkerchief in the spring, and with his hands on Abe's head bathes the bruises on his neck and shoulders.)

ABE
(In a voice grown strangely dignified and quiet.)
Thank'ee, thank'ee, Colonel Mack.

COLONEL
(Breathing heavily.)
Thanky nothing. I had to beat you, Abe, had to. Think no more about it. Dangerous thing, hitting a white man. But this is the end of it. Won't be no law, nothing but this. Put some tar and honey on yourself tonight and you'll be all right tomorrow. And keep your temper down. It's crazy--crazy.
(The bushes are suddenly parted at the rear and a tall sinuous young mulatto woman bounds through. She carries a bucket in her hand.

At the sight of the Colonel bathing Abe's head and neck she rushes forward with a low cry. The Colonel turns towards her.)
 Now, Goldie, ain't no use cutting up. Abe's been in a little trouble. Nothing much.

GOLDIE

(Moaning.)
 I heard the racket and I 'fraid somebody being killed. Is you hurt bad, Abe, honey babe?
 (She bends tenderly over him, her hand running over his hair.)
 Who hurt you, honey, who hurt you?

COLONEL

(Handing Goldie his handkerchief.)
 Look after him, Goldie.
 (He goes out at the left calling.)
 Wait a minute, Lonnie!

GOLDIE

What they do to you, Abe? Who hurt you?
 (All the time she is rubbing his neck, dabbing his shoulders with the handkerchief, and cooing over him.)
 Whyn't you kill them white mens if they hurt you? You can do it, break 'em like broomstraws.

ABE

(Standing up.)
 Ain't nobody hurt me. I crazy that's what--he say so--crazy in the head. Ain't nobody hurt me.

GOLDIE

(Clinging to him.)
 You is hurt, hurt bad. Look at your poor neck and shoulders. Look at 'em beat with great wales on 'em.

ABE

(Growling.)
 Ain't nobody hurt me, I tell you.

GOLDIE

Lay yourself down here and let me smoothe off your forehead and put some cold water on that mark across your face. Please'm, Abe.

ABE

(Suddenly crying out in a loud voice.)
 I ain't nothing, nothing. That white man beat me, beat me like a dog.
 (His voice rising into a wail.)
 He flail me like a suck-egg dog.
 (He rocks his head from side to side in a frenzy of wrath.)
 Lemme get to him!
 (He falls on his knees searching in the leaves and finds a stone.
 Goldie stands wringing her hands and moaning. He jumps to his feet, raising the stone high above his head.)
 Lemme get to him, I scrush his God-damn head like a egg shell!
 (He moves to the left to follow the Colonel. Goldie throws her arms around his neck.)

GOLDIE
No, no, you ain't gwine out there. Abe, Abe!

PUNY
(Crying out.)
Stop him, Bud! Lije, keep him back!

LIJE
(Coming from the pine tree.)
Here now, you Abe, stop that.

BUD
(Moving quickly before him and blocking his path.)
Stop that, fool. You gwine fix it to get yourself hung up on a telegram pole. Body so full of holes, sift sand.

GOLDIE
(Sobbing.)
Don't do it, Abe, sugar babe.
(She throws herself upon his breast.)

BUD
(Reaching towards her.)
Seem like you'd take yourself off'n that man!

ABE
(Pulling her arms from around him.)
Lemme loose, lemme loose.
(After a moment he throws the stone down.)
I ain't going to do nothing.
(He sits down on the log at the left, holding his head in his hands.)

GOLDIE
(Bringing her bucket.)
Here, eat something, Abe, you feel better. I got some pie and some cake in here for you.

PUNY
(Stepping back and forth in senseless excitement.)
Somebody gwine get killed at this mess, somebody--

ABE
(Pushing Goldie away.)
I ain't want nothing to eat. Ain't hungry.

LIJE
Better eat, Abe. Get your strength back.

ABE
(Savagely.)
Ain't hungry. I keep telling you.
(Goldie drops on her knees beside him and laying her head in his lap clasps her arms around him.)

GOLDIE

(Sobbing softly.)
Oh, boy, boy, why they beat you so? What you do to 'em?

ABE

Fool, fool I is. Crazy, that's it.

BUD

(Sharply.)
He given Mr. Lonnie and the Colonel back talk. Can't sass white mens and get away with it. Abe ought to know better.
(Lije wanders over to the right blowing his harp softly and forlornly.)

PUNY

(Sitting down on the ground.)
Can't be done, Abe. Can't.

BUD

(Stripping leaves from a bush and watching Goldie as she carries on over Abe.)
Here, woman, stop that rairing.
(Muttering to himself.)
Never see two bigger fools.
(Abe puts his hands mechanically on Goldie's shoulders and begins stroking her.)

ABE

Stop it, baby. Ain't no use to cry.
(Puny sits with his mouth open in astonishment watching them.
Lije lays himself back on the ground and blows his harp, apparently no longer interested in the scene.)

BUD

(Jealousy raging within him.)
Heigh, Goldie, get up from that man's lap. He ain't care nothing for you.
(Goldie's sobs die away and she is quiet.)
He say you foolish many a time. He look down on you.

GOLDIE

(Raising her tear-stained face.)
How you know. You jealous, Bud Gaskins. He better man than you. Worth a whole town of you.
(Catching Abe by the hand and picking up her bucket.)
Come on, come on, honey, let's go off there in the woods and eat our dinner by ourselves!

BUD

(Coming up to her.)
Here, you stay out'n that woods with him.

ABE

(Standing up.)
Yeh, yeh, I come with you.
(He moves mechanically on, and reaches out and pushes Bud behind him.)

GOLDIE

(Her face alight, a sort of reckless and unreal abandonment upon her.)

I knows where there's a cool place under a big tree. And there's cool green moss there and soft leaves. Let's go there, boy. I gwine tend to you and feed you.

(She moves across towards the right, leading Abe like a child.)
We make us a bed there, honey.

(Lije sits up watching them.)

Us forget the 'membrance of all this trouble.

(A kind of ecstasy breaking in her voice.)

There the birds sing and we hear the little branch running over the rocks. Cool there, sweet there, you can sleep, honey, rest there, baby. Your mammy, your child gwine love you, make you forget.

ABE

(Moved out of himself.)

Yeh, yeh, I come with you. I don't care for nothing, not nothing no more. You, just you'n me.

GOLDIE

Ain't no world, ain't no Lije and Bud, nobody. Us gwine make us a 'biding place and a pillow under that tree.

(In sweet oblivion.)

Feel your arms around me, my lips on yourn. We go singing up to heaven, honey, together--together.

(They go off, her voice gradually dying away like a nun's chant.)

BUD

(Breaking a sapling in his grasp.)

Gwine off, gwine off in the woods together there like hogs.

PUNY

(Bounding up, his body shaking in lascivious delight.)

I gwine watch 'em--hee-hee--I gwine watch 'em.

LIJE

(Knocking him back.)

Better stay out'n that woods. Abe kill you.

PUNY

(Standing up by the pine tree.)

Can see 'em, her still a-leading him.

LIJE

(Standing up and peering off to the right.)

There on the cool moss and the soft green leaves.

BUD

(Stripping the limbs from the top of the broken sapling.)

There she go playing the hog. Didn't know she like that. I the man for her, Bud Gaskins, I tame her, God damn her, I tame her down and take that spirit out'n her.

(He crowds out his chest and walks up and down.)

PUNY

(Grasping Lije's arm.)
Can't hardly see 'em no more, can you?

LIJE

Can hardly.

BUD

(His anger and jealousy disappearing in physical emotion and vulgar curiosity.)
Where they now?

LIJE

(Pointing.)
There, there, they crossing the branch now.

PUNY

(Breathlessly.)
I see 'em. I see 'em. His arm around her now, her head on his shoulder.
(He capers in his excitement.)
Lord! Lord!

BUD

(With a loud brutal laugh as he slaps Lije on the back.)
On the soft green moss.

LIJE

(Laughing back and dragging his harp across his mouth.)
Where the leaves is cool.

PUNY

Can't see 'em no more!
(He whirls about and turns a handspring.)
Whoopee, folkses! Gwine run away with myself!

BUD

(His eyes shining.)
Down where the sweet branch water run.
(He shuffles a jig among the leaves.)

LIJE

(Blowing upon his harp.)
Singing right up to heaven!
(He blows more wildly as they all drop into a barbaric dance that gradually mounts into a dionysiac frenzy.)

PUNY

Heaven!

BUD

Jesus, Lord, Father and Son!

LIJE

(Singing loudly as they dance, the music running into a quick thumping rhythm.)

My feet were wet with the sunrise dew,
The morning star were a witness too.

'Way, 'way up in the Rock of Ages,
In God's bosom gwine be my pillow.

(They gambol, turn and twist, run on all fours, rear themselves up on their haunches, cavort like goats.)

PUNY

In God's bosom--hanh!

BUD

In who bosom?

LIJE

In who bosom, bubber?

(A loud halloo comes down from the hill in the rear, unnoticed by them.)

PUNY

In Goldie's bosom. Hee-hee-hee.

BUD AND LIJE

Hah-haw-haw! Hee-hee-hee! In God's bosom gwine be my pillow.
(The halloo is repeated.)

LIJE

Here, there that Gabe calling us. Better get, or the Colonel have that stick on our back.

(They gather up their buckets and axes. Puny clambers up the pine a few feet and drops to the ground.)

BUD

Can see?

PUNY

See nothing. Hee-hee!

LIJE

Got to leave 'em now. Abe catch it again don't mind out. He not coming with us.

BUD

He done for now. That gal got him hard and fast.

(Snorting scornfully.)

Books! books! Rise 'em up like hell!

LIJE

I done told you. Heart say this, head say that. Bad mixtry. Bad. Crazy!

PUNY

(Shouting.)

Heigh, you Gabe! Coming!

(They move out at the rear up the hill, singing, laughing and jostling each other.)

THE THREE

'Way, 'way down by the sweet branch water,
In her bosom gwine be his pillow!

Hee-hee--haw-haw!

(Their loud, brutally mocking laughter floats back behind them.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 2

A spring day about three years later, in a two-room cabin, the home of Abraham McCranie. The room is roughly built of framed material and is unceiled. To the right front is a fireplace with a green oakwood fire going. A wood box is to the right of the chimney. To the left rear of the room is a bed, and at the left center rear a door leads out to the porch. To the right of the door a window gives a view of wide-streached cotton fields. Below the window close to the wall is a rough home-made chest with several books on it, and hanging between it and the door is a sort of calendar, with the illustration of a slave leaving his chains behind and walking up a hill towards the sunrise. There is a caption at the top of the print in large letters--"We Are Rising." Several old dresses, bonnets, and coats hang on the nails in the joists in the right rear. A door in the right center leads into the kitchen. At the left front is a dilapidated old bureau, small pieces of wood taking the place of lost casters. The top drawer is open, sagging down like a wide lip, with stray bits of clothing hanging over the edge. A bucket of water and a pan are on the bureau. There are several splint-bottomed chairs and a rocker in the room.

When the curtain rises Muh Mack is sitting by the fire rocking a bundle in her arms. She is a chocolate-colored Negress of near sixty, dressed in a long dirty wrapper, and barefooted. Her graying hair is wrapped in pig-tails and stands around her head Medusa-like. A long snuff-stick protrudes from her mouth. Goldie's long gaunt form lies stretched on the bed at the left partly covered by a sheet, her head resting on her arm. She is constantly raising in her languid hand a stick with a paper tied to it to shoo away the flies. Muh Mack rocks and sings.

MUH MACK

Oohm--oohm--hoonh--oohm--oohm--
This here baby the purtiest baby,
Purtiest baby in the land.
He gwine grow up champeen soldier,
Mammy's honey, onliest man.
Oohm--oohm--hoonh--oohm--oohm--

GOLDIE

(In a tired voice.)
How he coming now?

MUH MACK

(Shaking her finger and wagging her head at the bundle.)
Done seen him grow. Look at me like he know me.

GOLDIE

(With a long sigh.)
I so tired, tired. Seem like I can sleep forever.

MUH MACK

Lie and sleep, sleep. Get your strength.

GOLDIE

I tired but can't sleep.

(She lapses into silence The old woman rocks and sings.

Presently Goldie raises her head.)

What day today?

MUH MACK

Saturday.

GOLDIE

Seem like I can't 'member nothing. What day he come?

MUH MACK

He come a-Tuesday.

GOLDIE

That make him--let's see, how old?

MUCH MACK

Four day now.

GOLDIE

(Suddenly sitting up with a gasp.)

Them other two die, one three days, other'n four.

MUH MACK

Nanh--nanh, lie back down. This here baby live to be a hundred. He strong, he muscled. Them other poor little 'uns purry, born to die. The mark was on 'em from the first.

GOLDIE

(Bending her head between her knees and weeping softly.)

They was so pitiful and little. I can't forget how they feel and fumble for me with their little hands and they hungry.

MUH MACK

(Irritably.)

Bless God, crying after them, and got this fine 'un here. Lay yourself down on that bed and rest.

GOLDIE

Can't forget 'em, can't.

MUH MACK

Hunh, mought as well and they done plowed in the ground.

GOLDIE

(Her tears beginning to flow again.)

Yeh, yeh, they is! Abe didn't try to keep Mr. Lonnie from cutting down them plum bushes and plowing up that hedgerow. I hold it against him long as I live.

MUH MACK

Why for? The dead's the dead. Let the earth have 'em. Let cotton grow over 'em. No use moaning. Think on the living.

GOLDIE

Poor Abe, weren't his fault though. He proud, stand by and see white mens plow over 'em, say nothing, won't beg for his babies.

MUH MACK

Can't blame him! He stiff neck. God break his spirit. Give him two dead 'uns to fetch 'im down. He better humble now.

(Talking half to herself.)

He talk proud like, gwine raise up big son, leader among men. First 'un come thin, little like a rat. He hate him. He die. God call him. Then next year second come, Old Master keep him little, thin. He die too. Abe getting down to sackcloth and ashes. God see him down crying for mercy. He send this one, strong Israel man. He gwine flourish, he gwine wax.

GOLDIE

(Stretching herself out on the bed.)

Abe says this 'un gwine die too, same like the others. He don't look at him, pay no attention.

MUH MACK

Hunh, he will though when he see 'im fleshen up with his sucking.

GOLDIE

Where's Abe?

MUH MACK

Went down in the new-ground planting corn. Won't make nothing though and it the light of the moon time. He be here directly for his dinner.

GOLDIE

Poor Abe work too hard!

MUH MACK

(Snorting.)

Work too hard the mischief! Ain't work what all him. He studying old books and mess too much. Crop shows it.

GOLDIE

He don't look well, neither.

MUH MACK

Can't look well and worry all time.

(A step is heard on the porch.)

There he now. Take this baby. Got to put dinner on the table.

(She takes the baby over to Goldie, lays it by her side, goes out at the right, and is heard rattling dishes and pans in the kitchen.)

GOLDIE

(Crooning over the baby.)

Now you go sleep, rest yourself, get strong and grow great big.

(Abe comes in at the rear carrying a hoe and a file. He is barefooted and dressed in overalls, ragged shirt and weather-stained straw hat. Sitting down near the center of the room, he begins filing his hoe.)

ABE
(Without looking around.)
How you come on?

GOLDIE
Better, I reckon.
(With a sharp gasp.)
Here, why you fetch that hoe in the house?

ABE
(Paying no attention to her query.)
Baby still living, hunh?

GOLDIE
Abe, take that hoe out'n this house. Might bring bad luck on you.
(Raising herself up in bed.)
Might bring something on the baby.

ABE
Can't swub them new-ground bushes with no dull hoe.

GOLDIE
(Pleading.)
Take it out'n the house, I say.

ABE
When I damn ready.

GOLDIE
(Calling.)
Muh Mack! Muh Mack!

MUH MACK
(Coming to the door at the right.)
What ails you?
(She sees Abe filing his hoe.)
Lord helps us! Throw that thing out, throw it out! Ain't got no sense.
Goldie too weak to be worried up.

ABE
All right then. I finish with it now. Set of fools. Everything got a sign attached to it. Ignorant, blind!
(He throws the hoe out through the rear door and gets a book from the chest and begins reading.)

MUH MACK
Back at them books. Lord, never see such.
(She goes scornfully back to the kitchen.)

ABE
(Half growling.)
Says here we got to get out'n them suspicions and being afraid. Ain't no signs with evil and good in 'em. I read that last night.
(Reading and halting over the words.)
"The Negro is a superstitious person. There are signs and wonders in the weather, some fraught with evil, some with good. He plants his crops

according to the moon, works and labors under the eye of some evil spirit of his own imagining."

(Closing the book with a bang.)

Hear that?

GOLDIE

I hear but don't mind it. Mean nothing. White man wrote it, and he don't know.

ABE

That's just it, he do know. We the ones don't know. That book is wrote for you, Muh Mack, and all of the blind.

GOLDIE

Put up them old books. Seem like you care more for them than you do this here baby, and he a fine boy-child.

ABE

(Throwing the book back on the chest.)

What he nohow? Ain't interested in him. Ain't no use being. He be dead in a week. God done cuss me and my household. No luck at nothing. Can't raise children, can't raise crop, nothing. Ain't dry weather, wet. Ain't wet, dry. Here May month and cold enough for freeze.

(He stretches his feet to the fire.)

The damn crows down there on the creek pulling up my corn faster'n I can plant it.

(He rocks his head.)

Jesus!

GOLDIE

(Pleading.)

Abe, honey, don't get down. Things coming better now. This boy gwine make you feel better. Here he lie now just smiling like he understand me.

(Bending over the baby.)

Yeh, you is gwine grow up and take trouble off'n your poor daddy. Yeh, you is.

ABE

(Holding his head in his arms.)

Listen to that talk, listen there.

(Bitterly.)

Woman know. She know. Here I am with no money to buy me shoes.

(Holding up his dust-stained foot.)

There you is, foot, cut with glass, full of briars, wore out stumping the roots and snags, and I can't buy nothing to cover you with.

GOLDIE

The Colonel give you shoes, you ask him.

ABE

Ain't gwine ask him nothing, not nothing.

(Suddenly clenching his fist and hitting his thigh.)

That man beat me, beat me at the spring three year ago, I ain't forget.

(He gets up and strides over to the bed and looks down at the suckling infant.)

There you lie drinking your grub in. What you care? Nothing.

(He lays his hand roughly on the baby and pinches him. The child lets out a high thin wail.)

GOLDIE

(Beating his hand off.)

Quit that pinching that baby. Quit it!

ABE

(Laughing brutally as he walks up and down the floor.)

Yeh, you fight over him now and he be plowed in the ground like the others in a month. Hee-hee! Ain't this a hell of a mess! It sure God is. And we ain't got enough to feed a cat. You'n Muh Mack cook and slay and waste fast as I make it. Note at the store done took up, crop done all mortgaged up ahead of time. Can't make ends meet, can't.

(Throwing his hands out helplessly.)

I ain't no farmer.

GOLDIE

(Wretchedly.)

Oh, Abe, we get on somehow, we will. And Muh Mack and me don't waste. I be up with you in the fields by the middle of the week. Poor child, you need sleep, need rest.

ABE

Make no difference. Work our guts out do no good. I tell you, gal, we're down, down. The white man up there high. Sitting up with God, up there in his favor. He get everything, we get the scraps, leavings.

(Flaring out.)

Ain't no God for the black man, that's a white man's God. That come to me down in the new-ground.

(He sits down again, tapping his feet on the floor.)

GOLDIE

(Wiping her eyes.)

Honey, you got to stop talking like that. Can't be bad luck always. I's 'feared when you talk that wild talk. God hear it, he do.

(Muh Mack comes and stands in the door.)

He might be doing all this to make us good, make us humble down before him.

ABE

Humble down, hell! Look at the other darkies then. They shout and carry on in the church, pray and pay the preachers in their blindness. They humble. What do God do? Starve 'em to death. Kill 'em off like flies with consumption. They dying along the river same as the children in the wilderness.

MUH MACK

You blaspheming, that's what you doing. No wonder God take your babies away, no wonder he make your mule die, blast down your plans and send the crows and cold weather and root lice to destroy your crops.

(Her eyes flashing.)

You got to change your ways. Some day he gwine reach down from the clouds and grab you by the scruff of the neck and break you across he knee. He give you a fine baby child, you don't thank him. You got to fall down, pray, get low, get humble.

(Her voice rises into a semi-chant.)

You there, Jesus, hear my prayer. This poor sinner, he wicked, he blaspheme. Save him and save this poor little baby.

GOLDIE

(Weeping over the child.)

Do, Lord, hear our prayer.

(Abe sits down in his chair and stares moodily into the fire.)

MUH MACK

(Crying out.)

Them there old books cause it, that's what. Burn 'em up, burn 'em with fire. Your wild talk gwine make the Upper Powers drop lightning on this house, gwine destroy all of us.

(She wraps her arms before her, mumbling and swaying from side to side. Suddenly she raises her head and striding over to the chest shakes her fist at the books and kicks them.)

You the trouble. I hates the sight of you, and I wish there weren't nary one of you in the world.

ABE

(Reaching out and pulling her back.)

Look out, woman! Don't touch my books!

MUH MACK

You mash my arm!

(With a wail she goes out at the right and is heard sobbing in the kitchen.)

GOLDIE

Oh, you struck her! Abe--Abe--

(She sits up in the bed rocking the baby and quieting him. A heavy step sounds on the porch. Abe sits before the fire smoothing out the leaves of a book, as a voice calls from the outside.)

VOICE

Heigh, you, Abe!

GOLDIE

(Quickly.)

That the Colonel out there, Abe.

ABE

(Going to the door.)

Yes, suh, that you, Colonel Mack?

COLONEL

(Coming in.)

Yes. How you come on, all of you?

(He looks around the room and at the bed. Three years have worked a great change in him. He is stouter, his face mottled, and he walks with difficulty, propped on a stick.)
 Been wanting to see that fine baby, Abe.

ABE

(Quietly.)
 Yeh suh, yes suh.

MUH MACK

(Coming in.)
 And he sure is a fine 'un.
 (Standing near the Colonel.)
 Fine and strong same like Abe when he were born.

COLONEL

What's the matter, Goldie? Ain't been fighting, have you all?
 Who was that making a racket in here?

GOLDIE

(Keeping her head lowered.)
 I'm all right, Colonel Mack.

MUH MACK

(Wiping her eyes.)
 Ain't no row, Colonel. Want you to persuade that Abe to get rid of them old books. Enough trouble come on us account of 'em.

COLONEL

(Laughing.)
 The devil, let him keep his books. He's the only darky in the whole country worth a durn. Let me see the baby.

(Goldie shows the baby.)

That's a fine 'un, Abe. He'll live. Let me feel him.

(Holding him up.)

Heavy, gracious?

(Muh Mack looks at him intently and there is the vaguest touch of malice in her voice as she speaks.)

MUH MACK

Lord, it all comes to me again. Just such a day as this nigh thirty year ago you come down here and hold Abe up that-a-way.

COLONEL

(Looking through the window a long while.)
 Thirty years ago. Time hurries on, it goes by in a hurry.
 (Abe looks before him with an indefinable expression on his face. A constrained silence comes over them, and the Colonel takes a sort of refuge in gazing intently at the child. Once or twice he clears his throat as if about to speak. For an instant all differences are passed away and they are four human beings aware of the strangeness of their lives, conscious of what queer relationships have fastened them together.)

MUH MACK

(Starting.)

Yes, suh, we ain't got much longer down here.

(Then the baby begins to cry and the Colonel smiles.)

COLONEL

Here, take him, Goldie. Favors Muh Mack, don't favor you, Abe.

ABE

Yes, suh.

COLONEL

(Softly as if to himself.)

Nor your mammy.

(Then drawing a heavy, folded paper from his pocket slowly and with weighty dignity.)

I got a little surpris for you'n Goldie, Abe.

(He puts on his spectacles, opens the paper and starts to read.)

"Whereas"--

(He stops as if convulsed with pain, and presently goes on.)

--"I devise to Abraham McCranie a house and tract of land containing twenty-five acres and formerly known as the 'Howington place,' to him and his heirs forever."

(Hesitating a moment and folding the paper together.)

Then follows a description of the place in course and distance, Abe, which I won't read. It's all signed and recorded in the court-house.

(He feels around him heavily for his stick.)

ABE

(Incredulously.)

What that? That for me?

COLONEL

Yes, for you. A deed to this house and twenty-five acres of land, yours.

(He holds out the paper to Abe.)

ABE

(Taking it with trembling hands.)

Lord, Colonel Mack, what I going to say?

COLONEL

Say nothing. Say thanky if you want to.

ABE

(Overcome.)

Thanky, suh, thanky, suh.

COLONEL

Shake hands on it, Abe.

ABE

(Wiping his hand on his coat.)

Thanky, suh.

(The Colonel looks at his bent head with strange intentness, and then drops Abe's hand.)

GOLDIE

Oh, Colonel Mack?

(Her eyes are shining with thankfulness.)

MUH MACK

Abe, you's got land, boy, you owns a piece of land, Glory!

(She runs up to the Colonel and covers his hands with kisses.)

COLONEL

(Waving her off.)

Nothing, nothing to do for him. He deserves it.

(Looking straight at Abe.)

You do, boy. I want to see you go forward now. You had a hard time the last two years.

GOLDIE

He has, poor boy. He had it hard since the day he married me.

COLONEL

Hunh, he couldn't a-done better nowhere I know.

(The Colonel picks up his stick which he has laid across the bed.)

Well, I got to move on.

(He stops near the door.)

And, Abe, how's your book business coming on?

ABE

I--I'm studying and reading now and then. Most too tired every night to do much.

COLONEL

Don't give up like Lonnie. Sent him to school and sent him to school, even tried him at the university, won't stay. He ain't worth a continental, that's what.

(Turning towards the door and stopping again.)

Well, I've got another little surprise for you in celebration of that fine boy.

(He looks down and taps on the floor.)

ABE

(Excitedly.)

What is it, Colonel Mack, suh?

COLONEL

How'd you like to try your hand at teaching a little school next fall?

(Muh Mack throws up her hands.)

GOLDIE

(Breathlessly.)

Og, me!

ABE

(In confusion.)

Teach school? Yessuh, I--

COLONEL

I'm going to have that old Quillie House fixed up and put some benches in it and a blackboard. I'll get two Negroes to serve with me on the school board and we'll try you out.

(Smiling queerly.)

I want to see you try it before I die.

ABE

(With a great breath.)

I'm going to teach school--at last!

COLONEL

(Going shakily out at the door.)

Yes, at last. Now don't forget your crop, Abe, and study yourself to death.

ABE

(Following him.)

Colonel Mack, you, you--I--I--

COLONEL

Take care of that baby. Raise him up right. And, Abe, don't forget you ain't going to have no easy time. I'll get a lot of cussing for this, well as you. Go on eat your dinner.

(He stops on the porch and calls.)

Here, Goldie, take this fifty cents and buy the boy a stick of candy.

(He steps to the door and throws a coin on the bed.)

Take care of him and don't kill him on collards and beans.

(He goes off.)

ABE

(Calling after him.)

I ain't, Colonel, I'm going to raise him, going to make a man--

(He stops and stands watching the old man going up the lane.

Then he turns and stumbles into the room with shining face.)

I--I forgives him all. I don't remember that beating by the spring no more.

GOLDIE

(Reaching out from the bed and grasping his hand.)

Oh, honey babe, our troubles is ended. We gwine-- we gwine have enough to eat and you be happy.

(She turns over in the bed and begins to cry softly.)

ABE

(Patting her shoulders.)

There, there, don't you cry, child.

(He wipes his eyes with his sleeve.)

I been mean man.

(In a husky voice.)

I treat my gal mean, blaspheme against the Lord. I'm going do better, I--

(A sob clikes in his throat.)

MUH MACK

(Coming up to him and clasping her arms around him.)
Bless the Lord, you gwine do better now.
(She sits down in a chair and bows her head in her lap.)

GOLDIE

He good man, the Colonel. He too good to us. Raise us up, help us.

ABE

(Vaguely.)
Up! Lift me up! Up! Up towards the sun!
(He glances at the calendar.)
That whip don't hurt no more. The remembrance is passed away.
(Thumping on his breast.)
Ain't no more bitter gall in here. Peace. It come all sudden over me.
(He suddenly falls on his knees by the bed in a sobbing burst of prayer.)
O God, God of the poor and of the sinful!

MUH MACK

Yea, our God.

ABE

The black man's God, the white man's God, the one and only God, hear me, hear my prayer.

MUH MACK

(Swaying and moaning.)
Hear him, Jesus!

GOLDIE

(Softly.)
We thy chillun, Lord.

ABE

Thy little chillun, and you powerful. You the Almighty, us the dust in thy hand. Us poor and weak, us nothing. Like the grasshopper, like the poor field-lark, swept away in the storm. Man got no strength in him, no muscle can raise him, 'cepting your power. He walk in the wind, the wind take him away. Let there be fire, and the fire burn him. It devour him. Same like the broomstraw he fall before it. Man can't stand. He lost, lost. Shut in the grave, shut till the judgment.

MUH MACK

Jesus! Jesus!

GOLDIE

(Piteously.)
Jesus!

ABE

He fall in the winter. He lie down in the summer. The spring come and find him gone.

MUH MACK

Have mercy, our Father.

GOLDIE

(Whispering.)
Jesus, forgive him.

ABE

(His voice rising into a chant.)
The dirt stop up his poor mouth. Peace come to him in the ground. And the friends do cry, they wail and beat their breast. They call for their loved ones, and they don't answer.. Their tongue make no more speech, from the graveyard, from the deep grave.

MUH MACK

Yea, Lord!

ABE

They gone at the planting, gone at the harvest. The hoe dull with rust, the harness wait on the peg, the bridle hang still, the collar hang there useless. They ain't no more hoeing, ain't no more plowing, no shoe track in the furrow. Man gone, same like a whisper, hushed in the graveyard, in the deep grave.

MUH MACK

Oh, have mercy upon us.

GOLDIE

Mercy!

ABE

(Raising his head up, his eyes closed.) Hear us, hear us, hear me this day, hear my poor prayer. Forgive me my sins, my blasphemy. Wipe out the evil of my wicked days. Purify, make clean, forget the remembrance of my transgression. Now here I do humble down, I do confess. Lift me, raise me, up, up!

MUH MACK

Hallelujah!

GOLDIE

Amen.

ABE

(Bowing his head in a storm of grief.)
Reach down your hand and gimme strength. Now I draw nigh, I feel your spirit. Save me, save me now.

(Muh Mack and Goldie pray and moan aloud. Presently Abe stands up and cries out exultantly.)
He save me, he done save me! He done forgive me!

MUH MACK

(Clapping her hands wildly.)
Bless the Lord, bless him!

GOLDIE

(Faintly.)
Do, Jesus, save my baby and my husband.
(Abe is silent a moment, his face working with emotion. He turns and bends down over the bed.)

ABE

Poor little fellow. He sleep and rest.
(He puts his arms around Goldie and she clings to him.)
Honey child, I changed. I'm going to take new hold. From this day I begins. I'm sorry for all the past.
(He loosens her arms from around his neck and stands up, a strange set look on his face.)
I'm going to keep heart now, look up, rise. I'm going to lead.
(Looking down at the baby.)
I'm going to raise him up a light unto peoples. He be a new Moses, he bring the chillun out of bondage, out'n sin and ignorance.
(He turns suddenly and goes to the bucket at the left, pours some water out in a pan and sets it on the bed. Then he bends down and lifts the baby in his hand. Much Mack looks up, drying her eyes.)

GOLDIE

What that, Abe? What that you doing?

ABE

(Dipping his hand in the water and holding the child aloft, his face lighted up in a beatific smile.)
On this day I name you Douglass. You going to be same like him. Yeh, better. You going to be a light in darkness, a mighty man.
(He dips his hand into the water and sprinkles the child.)
I baptize you and consecrate you to the salvation of my peoples this day! Amen!
(The women stare at him transfixed, caught out of themselves. He bends his head and stands with the child stretched before him as if making an offering to some god.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 3

Winter of the same year. The old Quillie house, a Negro cabin of one bare room, now fitted up as a schoolhouse. At the left center is a squat rusty cast-iron stove, the pipe of which reels up a few feet and then topples over into an elbow to run through the wall. A box of pine knots rests on the floor by it. Four or five rough pine benches, worn slick by restless students, stretch nearly the length of the room, ending towards a small blackboard nailed to the wall in the rear center. Between the benches and the blackboard is the teacher's rickety table with a splint-bottomed chair behind it. A heavy dinner bell with a wooden handle is on the table. To the right rear is a small window, giving a glimpse of brown broom sedge stretching up a gentle hill, and beyond, a ragged field of stripped corn-stalks, gray now and falling down in the rot of winter rains. To the left rear is a door opening to the outside.

The curtain rises on the empty room. Presently Abraham McCranie comes in, carrying a tin lunch bucket and two or three books. He is wearing an old overcoat and a derby hat, both making some claims to a threadbare decency. He sets the bucket and books on the table and hangs his coat and hat on a nail in the wall at the right, then comes back to the stove, revealing himself dressed in baggy trousers, worn slick with too much ironing, heavy short coat, cheap shirt, and a celluloid collar with no tie. With his pocket-knife he whittles some shavings from a pine knot and starts a fire in the stove. He looks at his watch, beats his hands together from cold, and stirs about the room, his brow wrinkled in thought and apparent worry. Again and again he goes to the door and stares out expectantly. Looking at his watch the second and third time, he takes up the bell and goes out and rings it.

ABE

(Shouting towards the empty fields.)

Books! Books! Come in to books!

(He returns and sits down by the stove.)

No scholars in sight.

(With a sigh.)

Ahm.

(He goes to the board and writes laboriously across the top:

"January 21. An idle brain is the devil's workshop." While

he is writing, three Negro students come in carrying a bucket and

a book or two each--a lazy slumbrous girl of eighteen or twenty,

a stout thick-lipped youth about the same age, and a little serious-

faaced ragged boy of ten. Abe's face brightens at the sight of them.)

Good morning, chillun. Late. Everybody's a little late.

STUDENTS

(Standing uncertainly around the stove.)

Good morning, Mr. Mack.

ABE

(Finishing his writing.)

This will be our motto for today.

(Abe's speech has improved somewhat. He addresses the little boy.)

Read it, Eddie, out loud.

EDDIE

(Eagerly.)
I can read it, Mr. Mack.
(In a slow and halting voice he reads)
"An idle brain is the devil's workshop."

ABE

Good, fine. Can you read it, Neilly?

NEILLY

(Boldly.)
Yes, suh, read it right off.

ABE

And how about you, Lanie?

LANIE

(Dropping her heavy-lidded eyes.)
I can too.
(She and Neilly look at each other with a fleeting smile over some secret between them. Eddie gazes up at them, his lips moving silently as if over something to be told which he dare not utter.)

ABE

(Pulling out his watch.)
Twenty minutes to nine. Where the other scholars?
(No one answers. Neilly gives the girl a quick look and turns deftly on his heel and kicks the stove, sticking up his lips in a low whistle.)
You see the Ragland chillun on the road, Lanie?

LANIE

(Enigmatically.)
Yessuh. I see 'em.
(Abe goes to the door and rings his bell again.)

ABE

Books! Books! Come in to books!
(He puts the bell on the table and stands pondering.)
How about the Matthews chillun?

NEILLY

Ain't coming!

ABE

They say so?

NEILLY

Yessuh.

ABE

(Shortly.)
Take your seats. We'll go on with our lessons if nobody else don't come.
(He turns to his table.)

EDDIE

(Pulling excitedly at Lanie's dress.)
Go on, ask him what he gwine do.

LANIE

(Snatching herself loose from him.)
Shut up. Ain't my business.

ABE

Put your buckets up and take your seats and listen to the roll-call. All the late ones catch it on the woodpile and sweeping up the school yard.
(Eyeing them.)
I said take your seat.
(Eddie hurries to his seat.)

NEILLY

Ain't gwine have no school, is we?

ABE

Hunh?

NEILLY

Ain't gwine be no more school.
(Lanie giggles.)

ABE

(With a worried note in his voice.)
Going to have school same as usual. Seem like all of 'em late though. Take your seats, time for the spelling lesson. Won't have the scripture reading this morning.

NEILLY

The rest of 'em done quit school.
(Lanie giggles again.)

ABE

Stop that giggling and go to your seat.
(Lanie moves to her seat sulkily.)

EDDIE

(In a high frightened quaver.)
Mr. Mack, they all say the school ain't gwine run no more and they ain't coming.

ABE

How they hear it? I ain't heard it.
(No one answers.)
Where'd you folks get all this news, Neilly?

NEILLY

They was all talking it down the road. We wouldn't a-come neither, but Eddie there beg me and Lanie so hard to come with him. Ain't no more folks coming though.

ABE

(Hitting the table with his fist.)
Something up. They got to show me before I quit, they got to show me.
Put up your buckets and things, we're going to have school.

(They reluctantly set down their buckets near the wall and stand waiting.)

Take your seats, I say, and listen to your name.

(He pulls out a cheap memorandum book and begins calling the roll.)
Lanie Horton.

LANIE

Present.

(She looks around at the bare seats and gives her senseless giggle.)

ABE

Jay Gool Jones, absent; 'Ona May Jordan, absent; Jane Matthews, absent;
Sister Matthews, absent; Jennie McAllister, absent; Neilly McNeill.

NEILLY

Present.

(He smiles at Lanie.)

ABE

Arthur Ragland, absent. Didn't 'spect him back nohow. Dora Ragland,
absent; Nora Ragland, absent; Eddie Williams.

EDDIE

Present.

(Abe sits drumming on the table and staring before him. The students
twist about on their seats in embarrassment.)

ABE

(Roughly.)

Spelling lesson!

(The three move out and stand in a line before him.)

How many of you been over it at least four times?

(Eddie raises his hand.)

EDDIE

I been over it nine times forward and six backwards.

ABE

You, Neilly?

NEILLY

I been over it once and part twice, Mr. Mack.

ABE

Lanie?

LANIE

I dunno hardly.

ABE

Have you studied it any?

LANIE

(Pouting.)
I done lost my book somewhere.

ABE

And you were supposed to be head today. You'n Neilly can clean up the paper and sweep around the well at recess. Let's see your book, Eddie.

(Eddie hands him his book.)

Eddie, you got a head-mark yesterday; so you foot today.

(Opening the book.)

The first word is "chew," chew, like vittles, Lanie, "chew."

LANIE

C-c--C-u, "chew."

ABE

One more trial.

LANIE

(Pondering a long while.)
I can't spell that.

ABE

Yes, you can. Try it.

LANIE

C-h-u, "chew."

ABE

Next.

NEILLY

(Smiling ruefully.)
Too hard for me. Just well pass on.

ABE

(Working his jaws up and down.)
Watch me work my jaws. That's chew, chewing. Spell at it, Neilly, "chew."

NEILLY

(Scratching his head and nervously boring the floor with the toe of his shoe.)
Can't do it, can't form no letters in my head.

ABE

I'll have to pass it on then.

NEILLY

(Taking a hopeless shot at it.)
S-s--S-u, "chew." No, that wrong. I seed that word on the page, but can't remember it now. I can't spell it. Give it to Eddie, he can.

ABE

All right, Eddie.

EDDIE

C-h-e-w-- "chew."

(He darts around Neilly and Lanie and stands triumphantly at the head of the class.)

ABE

I'm going to send you back to your seats to study twenty minutes. Then come back here and don't make no such mess of it. I'll put the writing lesson up while you study.

(They go to their seats.)

Lanie, you look with Eddie in his book.

(He turns to the board and begins to write down the copy models.

As he writes, the students mumble over their words in a drone.

Neilly and Lanie begin talking to each other in low whispers. Eddie is lost in his book. Lanie suddenly giggles out loud, and Abe turns quickly from his board.)

Heigh you, Lanie, stand up in that corner over there. School isn't out yet.

LANIE

I ain't done nothing.

(Half audibly.)

"Isn't it?"

ABE

Don't talk back. Stand in the corner with your face to the wall. Here, Eddie, you read in this reader and let her have your book.

(Lanie creeps over to the corner and mouths over her lesson. Abe finishes his apothegm, "A wise man will rise with the sun, or before it." He is finishing another, "Wise children will imitate the manner of polite people," when there is a stir at the door and Puny Avery comes in, swallowed up in a teamster's coat and carrying a long blacksnake whip in his hand.)

PUNY

Good morning.

ABE

Good morning, Mr. Avery.

(At the appellation of "mister" Puny stuffs his cap against his mouth to hide a grin.)

PUNY

How you come on, Mr. McCranie? Can I warm my hands a minute?

Freezing cold sitting on that wagon seat.

(He moves up to the stove and stretches his hands above it.)

ABE

Help yourself. Be a snow before night, I believe.

PUNY

Yeh, or--look like it.

(He warms himself, and Abe sits at the table watching him questioningly. Now and then his gaze drops upon the whip.)

ABE
Hauling lumber over the river?

PUNY
Is that.
(Looking at Lanie in the corner.)
What she do?

ABE
Misbehaved.

PUNY
Seem like your school kinder thin.
(Abe says nothing.)
Been getting thinner every since Colonel died last fall, ain't it?

ABE
Been dropping off some since then.

PUNY
Where all the rest of the scholars?

ABE
Haven't showed up yet.

PUNY
Uhm.

ABE
Why you want to know, might I ask?

PUNY
(Authoritatively.)
Already know. And for your own good I come by to tell you and to bring you a message.

ABE
(Looking at him intently and then waving his hand at the three students.)
You chillun can go out and have recess now. Mr. Avery wants to see me on a little business.
(Lanie and Neilly get their coats and walk out. Eddie remains crouched in his seat, unconscious of his surroundings.)
What message you got for me?

PUNY
You just well quit the school business right here and now. They ain't gwine send to you no more.

ABE
What's the trouble?

PUNY

Trouble! You gone and done it, you has, when you beat Will Ragland's boy yesterday. Will so mad he can kill you.

ABE

(His anger rising in his voice.)
Needn't think I'm scared of him.

PUNY

I knows you ain't. But Will went around last night and got everybody to say they weren't gwine send to you no more.

ABE

(Angrily.)
I had a right to beat him. I couldn't make him work no other way, and besides he told a lie to me. Said he didn't eat poor little Sis Matthews' dinner. Several of 'em seen him do it.

PUNY

Can't help it. You beat him so Will done gone to the sheriff to get out papers for you.

ABE

(Starting out of his chair.)
Going to have me arrested?

PUNY

He is that. And more, I reckon. And my advice to you is to get from here. As a member of the school board I say, better leave.

ABE

He think he can run me away?

PUNY

Don't know what he think. Know I wouldn't like to lie in no white man's jail-house, that's me.

ABE

The other members of the board know about it?

PUNY

Us had a meeting last night.

ABE

What they say?

PUNY

(Fumbling in his pockets.)
They all side with Will, account of the beating and account of that speech you make in church last Sunday.

ABE

Were Mr. Lonnie there?

PUNY

He there and he send this here writing to you.

(He pulls a note from his pocket and hands it to Abe, who opens it excitedly.)

ABE

(Clenching his fist.)

That man say here--God--he say the board done all decied the school got to stop.

(He tears the note to pieces and throws it towards the stove.)

He say there he know a good job in Raleigh at public work he can get me.

(Bitterly.)

Say I do better at that than farming or school.

(Pacing the floor, he throws his hand above his head.)

Nanh-anh-suh, I sets a oath on high. I ain't going let 'em run me off.

They can't scare me. They can't run me off like I stole something.

(He turns on Puny with blazing eyes, and Eddie now watches him, terrified.)

Why you all vote that way? Whyn't you stand up and vote for me? You know I'm trying to do right. You weak, coward, no backbone.

PUNY

(Backing towards the door.)

I ain't got nothing against you, Abe. Why you 'buse me?

ABE

Get out 'o here. All of you down on me. That speech was so. It was right. That beating was right.

(Crying out.)

They can't run me. You can't run me. I fight 'em. I stay here. Let 'em put me in the jail, I last till the jail rot down.

(He moves menacingly towards Puny, who flees through the door and slams it after him.)

I come through their bars, their iron won't hold me. I'll get there, I'll come. My flesh will be as tough as their iron!

(He goes to the table and picks up his books. He opens the Bible and stands thinking. Dropping into his chair, he sits with his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, gazing into the distance. The anger and bitterness gradually pass from his face.)

That man's talk, proud. Can't push through without help--

(Putting his hand on the Bible.)

--without help from up there.

(He bows his head on the table. Eddie begins to sob and, leaving his seat timidly, approaches Abe's bent form, gulping and wiping his nose and eyes with his sleeve. Abe looks up and puts his arm around him.)

Son, this here's the last of this school. But we can't stop, we got to keep on.

(Eddie leans his head against him, his sobs increasing.)

Got to keep studying, got to keep climbing.

(After a moment he stands up and writes across the board, "This school is stopped for a while." Lanie and Neilly come inquiringly in.)

Chillun, ain't going to be any more school till maybe next year. You can go home.

(Lanie giggles and Neilly looks at him with familiar condescension.)
But I wants to dismiss with a word of prayer.

(At a sign from him, Eddie falls on his knees by the table. He gets down at his chair.)

Our Father, where two or three is gathered--

(Neilly and Lanie look at him, pick up their buckets and scurry out giggling and laughing loudly. Abe springs to his feet, his face blank with astonishment. He calls after them furiously.)

Heigh, heigh, you!

(They are heard going off, their sharp laughter softening in the distance.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 4

Fifteen years later. A room in the poverty-stricken Negro section of Durham, North Carolina. When the curtain rises, Goldie is washing at a tub placed on a goods-box at the left of the room. Muh Mack is seated at the fireplace at the right, bent under a slat bonnet and dozing. Pots and pans are piled around the hearth and a kettle is singing on the fire. Several garments are hanging on chairs before the fire drying.

To the left rear is a bed with a pile of rough-dried clothes on it. A door at the center rear leads into another room. To the right of the door is a low chest with books and dishes upon it. At the right front by the chimney is a small window letting in the sickly light of a dying winter day. In the center of the room is a small eating-table covered with a greasy, spotted oil-cloth.

Goldie washes heavily at the tub, her body bent and disfigured with the years of toil and poverty and the violence of childbirth. Her movements are slow, oxlike, and in her eyes now and then comes a sort of vacant look as if some deadening disease has had its way within her brain, or as if trouble and worry have hardened her beyond the possibility of enthusiasm or grief any more. Between her eyes a deep line has furrowed itself, a line often found on the foreheads of those who think a great deal or those who are forgetting how to think at all. And her mouth has long ago fastened itself into a drawn anguished questioning that has no easeful answer in the world. She washes away at the tub, the garment making a kind of flopping sound against the board. After a moment she calls to Muh Mack.

GOLDIE

Getting near about day-down, Muh Mack. Time to start supper.

MUH MACK

(Whom age and poverty have made meaner than before.)
Yeh, yeh, it is, and I got to get it, I reckon.

GOLDIE

(Making an effort to hurry.)
Yeh, Mis' Duke got to have her clothes tomorrow, I done said.

MUH MACK

(Getting slowly to her feet.)
What I gwine cook?

GOLDIE

Make some corn bread, and there's a little piece of Baltimore meat in the chest.

(Muh Mack arranges her pan on the fire with much grumbling and growling, and goes over to the chest.)

MUH MACK

(Knocking the pile of books off with a bang.)
Here them old books of Abe's piled right in the way. I'm a mind to burn 'em up. Always where they ain't got no business.

GOLDIE

(Abstractedly.)
Yeh, yeh. Always a mind to burn 'em.
(Muh Mack opens the chest and pulls out a small piece of white meat.)

MUH MACK

Hunh, look at this, will you? Ain't more'n enough to fill my old hollow tooth. Can't us get something else for supper? I et that old meat and corn bread till it makes me heave to look at it.

GOLDIE

That all they is.

MUH MACK

That won't make a mouthful for Abe. What we gwine eat, I ask you?

GOLDIE

Abe won't eat it nohow, and I don't want nothing. You'n Douglass can eat it.

MUH MACK

Both of you gwine die if you don't eat. That Abe been living off'n coffee and bread two weeks now. No wonder he look like a shadow and can't half do his work.

GOLDIE

Can't eat when you ain't got it.

MUH MACK

Well, starving ain't gwine give you strength to get no more.
How you gwine keep washing for folks and you don't eat?

GOLDIE

(Bowing her head in weariness over the tub, her voice rising with sudden shrillness.)
Oh, Lord God in heaven, I don't know!

MUH MACK

Calling on God ain't gwine help you get no supper either.
(Throwing the meat back into the chest and slamming the lid.)
Well, I won't cook that old mess. I'll sit right here by this fire and starve with you and Abe.

GOLDIE

(Drying her hands on her apron.)
I got just one more fifty-cent piece in that pocketbook. I'll get it and run out and buy some pork then. Poor Abe got to live somehow.
(She goes out at the rear and returns immediately holding an empty ragged purse in her hand.)
Where my half dollar? Where is it?

MUH MACK

How do I know?

GOLDIE

(Sitting down and rocking back and forth.)

Somebody stole it.

(Turning upon Muh Mack.)

You done given it to that Douglass.

MUH MACK

Ain't.

GOLDIE.

Yeh, you has, you has.

MUH MACK

(Beating the floor with her foot.)

Ain't, I tell you.

GOLDIE

(Staggering to her feet.)

And he off somewheres spending it for ice cream and mess.

MUH MACK

Don't care if I did. Poor boy do without all the time.

GOLDIE

(Falling on the tub with renewed vigor.)

Can't cry now!

MUH MACK

Go on down there and get that man to let you have something on a credit.
You can pay him tomorrow when Mis' Duke pay you.

GOLDIE

He done said he ain't gwine let us have no more without the money.

MUH MACK

Maybe Abe fetch something when he come.

GOLDIE

How can he and they don't pay him off till tomorrow evening?

MUH MACK

(Suddenly crying out with a whimper.)

I wants to go back home. I wants to go back home. Mr. Lonnie won't let us starve.

GOLDIE

I been wanting to go back for fifteen year, but Abe's gwine die 'fore he go back.

MUH MACK

(Beating her hands together in her lap.)
Crazy, crazy! He the biggest fool in the whole world. He getting down lower every day. Getting sick worse all the time. Oh, me, what'll become of us all!

GOLDIE

(Hopelessly.)
The Lord maybe'll provide.

MUH MACK

(Snorting.)
Hunh, he mought. He ain't gwine provide nothing lees'n us do something.
(Her voice falling into a sort of hysterical whine.)
Here I is all laid up with rheumatiz and can't see how to travel no more and about to starve. Starve, hear me!

GOLDIE

(Dropping into her chair again.)
You ain't the only one.

MUH MACK

Reckon I knows it. But that don't keep my stomach from cutting up.

GOLDIE

We doing the best we can by you.

MUH MACK

(Somewhat softened.)
I knows it, child, but that Abe, that Abe, I say! He the trouble at the bottom of it all.

GOLDIE

Needn't keep talking about Abe. Why don't you say that to his face? He doing the best he can.

MUH MACK

(Her anger rising.)
I will tell him. There you sit, Goldie McCranie, and say that, after he done drug you from pillar to post for fifteen year. Doing the best he can! He ain't nothing, just worse'n nothing! He just a plumb fool. But my sister Caroline were a fool before him. That's how come she mammied him into this world the way she done.

GOLDIE

Stop that. He's sick, been sick a long time, poor fellow, and he keeps trying.

MUH MACK

Sick! He weren't sick back there when he got into court and lost all his land trying to get them lawyers to keep him out'n jail, and he beat that Will Ragland's boy half to death.

(Goldie bows her head in her hands, swaying from side to side.)
The devil in him! That's what. And were he sick, and he cutting up a rust

in Raleigh and the white folks running him out'n there? It was old Scratch in him there too, I tells you.

GOLDIE

(Wretchedly.)

They didn't treat him right over there.

MUH MACK

Hunh. No, they didn't. And they didn't treat him right in Greensboro, did they? Same old tale there, getting in a row with somebody and have to leave. He's mean, mean like something mad at the world.

GOLDIE

(Tossing her head about her.)

I dunno, I dunno. He ought to never married me and got tied down. Seem like things all go wrong, crosswise for him.

MUH MACK

(Staring at her.)

Hunh. Things'll be crosswise with him till they straighten him out in the grave. Them's my gospel words.

(Blowing her nose in her skirt and half weeping.)

If all that shooting and killing in Wilmington wouldn't make him do better, nothing in God's world can.

GOLDIE

(Moaning.)

Stop that talking. I can't bear it.

MUH MACK

That's just what you ought to stop doing, stop bearing it. Gather up your duds and take me'n Douglass and whop off'n leave him, that's what you ought to do.

GOLDIE

(Beating herself with her fist.)

I ain't. I ain't. I gwine stay by him.

MUH MACK

'Course you gwine stay by him--and starve too. For that's what you'll do. What he don't spend on medicine he do on them old lodges and such and books and newspapers. And gets turned out'n every one of 'em for his speeches and wild talk, he do.

(With grim satisfaction.)

Shoveling that coal down at the power house reckon'll hold him for a while.

(With an afterthought.)

Hold him down till somebody crack his head with a shovel and turn him off.

(Stirring the fire and then folding up her hands.)

I done said my say-so now. Do no good, 'cause you so wrapped up in the fool.

GOLDIE

(Flaring out.)

No, it won't do no good. I gwine stick by him.

(Rising and turning to her work again.)

They ain't never done him right. They all been down on him from the first.

MUH MACK

(Shrilly.)

And'll be till the last. Other colored folks make a living for their family. Why don't he? Always got his eyes on something else.

GOLDIE

He gwine be a big man yet. Them others do the dirty work and take what they can get. They the low-down trash.

(Her voice trembling.)

He gwine get him a big school some these days.

MUH MACK

(Laughing scornfully.)

Hee-hee--hee. Listen at her. He can't teach nothing. The colored teachers round here know more in a minute than Abe do in a week. They been to college at Raleigh and Greensboro and no telling where. And they got some sense besides their learning. That little Eddie Williams has. He done gone through that Shaw school in Raleigh and is off doing big work. Why couldn't Abe do something like that!

(Pulling a walking stick from the chimney corner.)

I gwine go down to Liza's and ax her to give me some supper.

(She groans and creaks to her feet.)

GOLDIE

Wait'll Douglass come from school and I'll get him to go down to the corner and get some meat from that man--maybe.

MUH MACK

Done past time for Douglass to be here. Mought not come till late.

GOLDIE

(Drying her hands again and patting her hair.)

I'll go then. You put the kettle on for some coffee and set the table and I'll be right back.

(Far off a muffled whistle blows.)

There's the power-house whistle. Abe be here soon. Light the lamp.

(She goes out.)

MUH MACK

(Somewhat mollified, calling after her.)

All right--and you beg that meat man--keep begging till he have to give in.

(She puts her stick back in the corner, fills the kettle and stirs stiffly about her, bringing plates to the table and laying out the knives and forks. She hobbles into the room at the rear and returns with a lamp without any chimney, which she lights at the fireplace and places on the table. While she is engaged in making coffee over the fire, Douglass strolls in. He is a young Negro in short trousers, fifteen or sixteen years old, black as Muh Mack and with something of a wild and worthless spirit already beginning to show in his face. He carries two ragged books under his arm.)

DOUGLASS

(Dropping the books by the door and kicking them near the chest.)

Heigh!

MUH MACK

(Jumping.)

Who?--hee--hee, you scared me, honey.

(She stands up and looks at him indulgently.)
Where you been so late?

DOUGLASS

Oh, round and about. Stopped by the hot dog stand a while, chewing the rag with some fellows.

MUH MACK

How many them sausage things you eat?

DOUGLASS

Dunno. Several.

MUH MACK

(Leaning forward, her eyes shining with anticipation.)
What you fotch me to eat?

DOUGLASS

I wanted to bring you something, but--

MUH MACK

You mean you ain't brought me nothing with that fifty cents?

DOUGLASS

I fool-like matched with some of 'em down there and had to set 'em up.

MUH MACK

And I so hungry my stomach just hollering.

DOUGLASS

(Nonchalantly.)

I can't help it.

MUH MACK

(Threateningly.)

I gwine tell your daddy on you.

DOUGLASS

(Looking at her.)

Hunh, you better not. Do and I won't play nary piece for you in--in two weeks maybe.

MUH MACK

(Turning to her cooking.)

Your muh know about it.

DOUGLASS

Why you tell her?

MUH MACK

She guessed at it. She knowed you tuk that money soon's she found it gone.

DOUGLASS

(Alarmed.)

Pap don't know, do he?

MUH MACK

Not yet. He ain't come from work.

(Douglass turns back into the room at the rear and reappears with a guitar. Sitting down wonderfully at ease, he begins strumming.)

Lord, Lord, honey, give us a piece 'fore your daddy come.

(He falls to playing, and Muh Mack begins to pat the floor and skip happily now and then as she moves about the fireplace.)

Hee-hee--that's better'n eating.

DOUGLASS

(Hugging up the "box" and throwing back his head in abandon.)

Hee-hee--ain't it though!

(He turns and scowls at the books lying on the floor, and begins singing to them.)

Them old books--

(Strum, strum.)

Lying in the corner.--

(Strum, strum.)

Them old books--

(Strum, strum.)

--lying in the corner--

(Strum, strum.)

Lie there, babies, lie there! Hee-hee--Muh Mack, I can make music right out'n my head.

(He goes on throwing his fingers across the strings.)

MUH MACK

You can, honey, you surely can.

(She sits listening happily. He wraps himself over the guitar, his fingers popping up and down the neck of the instrument with marvelous dexterity. His bowed head begins to weave about him rhythmically as he bursts into snatches of song.)

DOUGLASS

(Singing.)

Look down, look down that lonesome road,
The hacks all dead in line.
Some give a nickel, some give a dime
To bury this poor body of mine.

MUH MACK

(Staring at him.)

I declare! I declare! Listen at that child.

DOUGLASS

Never mind, never mind me.

(Modulating with amazing swiftness from key to key.)
And there was poor Brady, Poor old Brady.

MUH MACK

Yeh, Brady, they laid him down to die.

DOUGLASS

(Singing.)

Oh, Brady, Brady, you know you done me wrong,
You come in when the game was a-going on!
And they laid poor Brady down.

Womens in Georgy they heard the news
Walking about in their little red shoes,
They glad, they glad poor Brady dead.

When I close my eyes to catch a little sleep,
Poor old Brady about my bed do creep,
One more, just one more rounder gone.

(While he is singing and playing, Abe comes suddenly in at the rear dragging a heavy wooden box in one hand and carrying a dinner pail in the other. He is dirty and begrimed with coal dust.)

ABE

(Shouting.)

Put up that box!

(Douglass bounds out of his chair as if shot and backs away from him.)

Put down that damn guitar, you good-for-nothing!

(Abe hangs his cap and dinner pail on a nail by the door and comes heavily across to the fire. His face is haggard and old and his shoulders have grown humped with the going of time. Douglass slips out with his guitar and presently creeps in and sits stealthily on the chest. Abe lays the goods box on the floor and breaks it up and places pieces of it on the fire. Then he sits down and stretches out his feet and stares moodily before him. Muh Mack hurries around making bread, frying the hated side meat, and arranging the table.)

MUH MACK

(Tremulously.)

How you feeling? You come quick after the whistle--

ABE

Ah, feel like I'll stifle in here.

(He strikes his breast once and then follows it with a fury of savage blows.)

Can't get no wind down in that boiler house.

(He drags his hand wearily across his brow and shakes his head as if clearing his eyes of a fog.)

Where's Goldie?

MUH MACK

Gone out to the corner to beg some meat. Time she back.

ABE

How long 'fore supper?

MUH MACK

Soon's she gets back and we can cook the meat--if they is meat.

ABE

(Pulling off his shoes and setting them in the corner.)
I'm going to lie down a minute till my head clears up. Feel like it'll blow off at the top.

(Grasping his chair, he staggers to his feet and goes across the room. At the door he stops and looks down at Douglass.)
I'm going to tend to you in a little bit.
(Douglass quails before him. He goes out and slams the door.)

MUH MACK

What the name of God ail him now? Worse'n ever.

DOUGLASS

(Whimpering.)
He gonna beat me! He'll kill me.
(The bed is heard creaking in the rear room as Abe lies down.)

MUH MACK

What'n the world for?
(She stands tapping her hands together helplessly.)

DOUGLASS

He done heared sump'n on me. Oh, he gonna beat me to death.
(Abe is heard turning in his bed again, and he immediately appears in the door.)

ABE

Shut up that whimpering. Get over there and start washing on them clothes for your poor mammy.
(Douglass darts over and begins rubbing at the board and sniffing.)
Dry up, I tell you.
(Abe turns back to his bed.)

MUH MACK

(Sitting to the fire and rocking back and forth in her anxiety.)
Oh, Lord--Lord!
(She hides her head in her skirt grumbling and moaning. Presently Goldie comes in.)

GOLDIE

(Coming over to the tub.)
Look out, son, lemme get at 'em.
(She falls to washing feverishly.)

MUH MACK

(Looking up.)
Where that meat, Goldie?

GOLDIE

That man look at me and laugh--he laugh.
(Turning angrily towards Douglass.)
You went and--

MUH MACK

(Throwing out her hand in alarm.)
Nanh, nanh, Goldie.
(Lowering her voice and nodding to the rear.)
Abe in there. He find out about that, he kill the boy. Done say he gwine beat him for sump'n or other.

GOLDIE

When he come?

MUH MACK

He just this minute got here.

GOLDIE

(In alarm.)
He worse off, I bet.
(She hurries into the room and is heard talking softly and kindly to Abe. He answers her with indistinct growls. In a moment Goldie returns.)
Put what you got on the table and let's eat.
(She goes on with her washing.)
Abe ain't feeling well. Have to eat what he can, I reckon.
(Muh Mack puts the bread, coffee and meat on the table.)

MUH MACK

Come on, you all.

GOLDIE

Come on in, Abe.
(Abe enters in his undershirt and trousers.)
Go on and eat. I don't want nothing.

ABE

(Almost falling in his chair.)
Come on and set whether you can or not.
(Goldie takes her place at the table.)
Come on, Douglass.

DOUGLASS

I don't want nothing either.
(Muh Mack draws up her chair.)

ABE

Don't make no difference. I said come on.

(Douglass gets a chair and takes his place. Abe surveys the fare before him.)

This all you got for a working man and he sick?

GOLDIE

I didn't have no money, and--

(She gulps and drops her head to hide the tears.)

ABE

(Kindly as he reaches out and touches her shoulder.)

Never mind, honey child.

(He closes his eyes with weariness and sits brooding. Presently he raises his head.)

Well, never you mind, I ain't hungry.

(Looking at her sadly.)

But you must be plumb wore out with all that washing and all.

(Dropping his head.)

Let's have the blessing. Oh, Lord, we thank Thee for what we have before us. Make us truly thankful for all Thy gifts and save us at last, we humbly beg, for Christ's sake, Amen!

(After the blessing Goldie still keeps her head bowed, her shoulders heaving with repressed sobs. Muh Mack pours out the coffee and hands it round. Abe calls to Goldie.)

Come on eat sump'n, Goldie, you feel better, you git your strength back. Drink some this coffee.

(Goldie, bursting into wild sobs, goes and sits by the fire.)

ABE

What's the matter, child?

MUH MACK

She done worked to death and nothing to work on, that's what.

ABE

(Drinking down a cup of steaming coffee at a gulp.)

Pour me some more of that!

(Goldie's sobs gradually die away.)

Come on, honey, don't cry no more!

(Goldie stands up and looks towards the table with anguished face.)

GOLDIE

Abe, Abe honey babe, what us gwine do?

(She buries her face in her hands.)

ABE

You done heared sump'n, ain't you?

GOLDIE

Yeh, yeh, Liza told me. Jim done come from the power house and told her.

ABE

(Dully.)

Never mind. Come on drink some coffee. We talk about that directly. I got sump'n else to tell you, too.

MUH MACK

(Staring at him in fear.)
What that happen at the power house?

ABE

I tell you when I get good and ready. Come on, Goldie child.
(Goldie wipes her eyes and returns to the table to drink her coffee.)
Before we gets on what happened with me, I got a question to ax this young gentleman.
(Looking across at Douglass.)
Why don't you eat?

DOUGLASS

(Falteringly.)
I ain't hungry.

ABE

Try and see do you want anything.

DOUGLASS

I can't eat nothing.

ABE

How come?

DOUGLASS

I just don't want nothing.

ABE

(Bitterly.)
I reckon I know how come. This evening I pass on the other side of the street and see you down there at that drink stand setting up them worthless fellows with your mammy's good money.
(Savegely.)
Oh yeh, I know that's where you got it. I see you last night watching her put it away.

GOLDIE

Please don't have no more row, Abe.

ABE

I ain't going to beat him for that, nunh-unh. Sump'n else he's going to catch it for.

(Raging out.)

The teacher stop me on the street and tell me you doing worse'n ever in your books and she done had to put you back in the third reader.

(Swallowing another cup of coffee down with a hunk of bread, he stands up and stares into the distance.)

Here we done labor and sweat for you, fix for you to rise up and be sump'n. Eight year you been going to school and you won't work, you won't learn.

(He strikes the table with his fist, and the lamp flickers and almost goes out.)

You ain't no good. Once I thought you going go on, climb, rise high and lead.
(He seizes Douglass by the collar and, lifting him from the floor, shakes him like a rag.)

DOUGLASS

(Sputtering and choking.)
Pap, Papa!

MUH MACK

(Shrieking in terror.)
Stop that! You kill him!

ABE

I teach you to fool with low-down trash! I get you out'n them trifling ways or I'll break your back in two.

(He sits down and jerks the boy across his knee and begins beating him blindly.)

I name you for a great man, a man what stand high like the sun, and you turn out to be the lowest of the low! Change your name, that's what you better do.

(With a cuff on the cheek he hurls him across the room, where he falls sobbing and wailing on the floor.)

Shut that fuss up!

(Douglass' sobs gradually cease. Goldie starts towards him, but Abe jerks her back.)

Let him lie there, the skunk and coward.

(Goldie turns despairingly to her washing again. Abe moves to the fire and sits down, pulling a wrinkled newspaper out of his pockets, while Muh Mack rocks and slobbers and moans.)

MUH MACK

You need the law on you, Abe McCranie. You beat that poor baby--

ABE

Shut up! You what ruin him. He takes after you and your trifling.

MUH MACK

Oh, I gwine leave here, find me another place to stay.

ABE

We all got to get another place to stay.

GOLDIE

Let's go back home, Abe! Let's go back.

MUH MACK

Have we got to leave 'cause of what you done down at the power house?

(Wringing her hands.)

What you do down there? Oh, Lord!

ABE

Ain't no use waking up the neighborhood with your yelling. I didn't do nothing but stand up for my rights. A white man sass me and I sass back at him. And a crowd of 'em run me off. Won't be able to get no other job in this town, God damn it!

(Standing up and shaking his fist.)

God damn the people in this town! Them with their tobacco warehouses, and cotton mills, and money in the bank, you couldn't handle with a shovel!

MUH MACK

Let's go back home. The Colonel fix it in his will so us could have a place to come back to. Mr. Lonnie'll rent us some land.

GOLDIE

(Coming over to Abe's chair and dropping on her knees beside him.)
Abe, Abe, let's go back. Please do. Let's go back where we grew up. Ain't no home for us in no town. We got to get back to the country. That's where we belong.

(She lays her head in his lap.)

ABE

(Looking down at her tenderly.)
Yeh, yeh, honey. We is going back. After all these years I knows now the town ain't no place for us. Fifteen year we been trying to make it and couldn't. That's what I was going to tell you. All the signs been against us. I ought to knowed it after three or four years. Back home the place for us. Back in our own country.

(Staring before him and a smile suddenly sweetening the hardness of his face.)

We go back there and take a new start. We going to build up on a new foundation. Took all these years to show me.

(His voice rising in nervous exultation.)

There's where my work is cut out to be. It come to me this evening while I walked on the street.

(Standing up.)

Seem like sump'n spoke to me and said go back down on the Cape Fair River. I heared it plain like a voice talking. "These streets and these peoples ain't your peoples. Your'n is the kind what works and labors with the earth and the sun. Them who knows the earth and the fullness thereof. There's where your harvest is to be." And then when I come face to face with the ruining of my boy, in my anger I see the way clear. We going back, we going back. And there at last I knows I'm going to build up and lead! And my boy going to be a man.

(Looking at Douglass with a hint of pleadingness.)

Ain't it so?

(But Douglass only stares at him coldly.)

GOLDIE

(Looking up at him.)

I knows you will. I feel it just the way you do. I keep telling Muh Mack some day you gwine get there.

ABE

(Gazing down at her.)

These years all been sent for our trial, ain't they, honey?

GOLDIE

Yeh, yeh, we been tried all for a purpose.

ABE

And now we ready, ain't we, honey?

GOLDIE

We ready to go back and start all over.

MUH MACK

(Repeating uncertainly.)
To start all over.

ABE

To build us a monument from generation unto generation.

GOLDIE

(Softly, the tears pouring from her eyes.)
Yeh, yeh.

ABE

And all this sin and tribulation and sorrow will be forgot, passed away,
wiped out till the judgment, won't it child?

GOLDIE

It will, oh, I knows it will. We done suffered our share and Old Master
gwine be good to us now.

ABE

Good! Yeh, good!
(He sits with bowed head.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 5

Three years later. The same as Scene Two, in Abe's cabin on the McCranie farm. The room shows some sign of improvement over its former state. There is a lambrequin of crepe paper on the mantel, a wooden clock, and at the right a home-fashioned bookcase with books and magazines. On the rear wall is the same colored print with the caption of the rising slave.

Abe is seated at a table near the front writing by a lighted lamp. He is better dressed and more alert than formerly. Farther back and to the left of the fireplace sits Muh Mack dozing and quarreling in her rocking-chair. Her head and face are hid under the same slat-bonnet, and a dirty pink "fascinator" is draped over her bony shoulders. Her huge snuff brush protrudes from her lips and now and then describes a sort of waving motion when she moves her jaws in sleep. Between her knees she clasps her walking-stick.

Through the window at the rear come bright streaks from the orange after-glow of the west. The November sun has set and the sky near the horizon is fading into a deep gloom under an approaching cloudiness. In the oaks outside the house the sparrows going to roost pour out a flooding medley of sharp calls resembling the heavy dripping of rain from eaves. For a moment Abe continues his writing and then lays down his pencil and replenishes the fire. He returns to his chair and sits drumming absently on the table.

ABE

When's Goldie coming back, Muh Mack?

(His speech is gentle and more cultivated.)

MUH MACK

(Starting out of her sleep.)

What you say?

ABE

When Goldie coming back from Mr. Lonnie's?

MUH MACK

When she get done of that washing and ironing, poor thing.

ABE

Seem like it's time she was back.

MUH MACK

What you care about her and you sitting there all day working at that old speech mess.

ABE

You going to cook any supper?

MUH MACK

Supper! You ax that and know I can't get out'n my chair with the stiffness and misery. You'll have to eat cold.

ABE

I've done looked. Ain't nothing cold.

MUH MACK

Then you'll have to wait till she come. Poor, poor thing, with all her trouble wonder she able to cook or work or do anything.

(She turns to her snoozing, and Abe picks up his pencil again and gnaws at it as he works on his speech. Soon he stops and begins tapping on the table.)

ABE

What trouble she got now?

MUH MACK

(Astounded.)

You ax that and you fixing to bring more trouble on us with your schooling and mess. And with Mr. Lonnie down on you about the crop again. Lord, Lord! And who that won't let his poor boy put foot in the home? Keep him driv' off like a homeless dog.

(She wipes her eyes with a dirty rag.)

ABE

You whine, but this time they won't be no failing. The school is going through. Then I can talk to Mr. Lonnie. Six men done already promised a thousand dollars. Can't fail this time, no suh.

MUH MACK

You don't deserve nothing, and won't let poor Douglass come back to see his mammy--and his old auntie that loves him.

(Brightly.)

Them men maybe ain't promised. They talking.

ABE

(Sharply.)

I know--You needn't say another word about it.

(Concerned with the speech.)

And that Douglass-- I won't let him darken my door.

(Muh Mack stirs from her doze and snuffles into her rag, wiping the rheumy tears from her eyes. Abe turns to his writing. He writes more and more rapidly as he nears the end. Presently he throws down his pencil and stretches his arms back of his head with a weary yawn. He looks towards Muh Mack and speaks exultantly.)

ABE

That's the best I've ever done. They can't go against that, they can't this time.

MUH MACK

(Sleepily, rubbing her eyes and speaking coldly.)

Thank God you's finished your speech and'll soon be out'n my sight and I can get a little nap.

ABE

(Not noticing her.)
That crowd's going to listen to me tonight.

MUH MACK

Maybe they will, but you's talked your life away, and it hain't come to nothing.

ABE

(Looking at the speech.)
I've done my best this time. All I got from books and experience is there, and the truth's in it.

(He gathers the closely written sheets together.)
I tell 'em--

(He turns to his speech and begins to read as he rises from his chair.)
I say, ladies and gentlemen--

(He does not notice the movement of disgust Muh Mack makes as she turns away from him.)
--this night is going to mean much in the lives of each and every one of us, big and little.

MUH MACK

Hit won't if they treats they chillun like you treats your'n.

ABE

(Hurrying on.)

It marks the founding of the Cape Fair Training School, an institution that will one day be a light to other institutions around and about. It is to be our aim here, with the few teachers and facilities we can provide, to offer education to the colored children amongst us and offer it cheap.

(He turns toward Muh Mack and speaks with more spirit, as if his audience were directly before him. But she turns her back to him and blinks in the fire.)

Looking over the country, ladies and gentlemen, we see ten million souls striving in slavery, yea, slavery, brethren, the slavery of ignorance. And ignorance means being oppressed, both by yourselves and by others--hewers of wood and drawers of water.

(He picks up his pencil and crosses out a word.)

MUH MACK

(Sarcastically.)

They hain't nobody been in slavery since the surrender. If they is, how come? And I reckon the hewers of wood and the drawers of water is about free as anybody.

ABE

(Continuing his speech without noticing her.)
Ignorance means sin, and sin means destruction, destruction before the law and destruction in a man's own heart. The Negro will rise when his character is of the nature to cause him to rise--for on that the future of the race depends, and that character is mostly to be built by education, for it cannot exist in ignorance. Let me repeat again, ladies and gentlemen. We want our children and our grandchildren to march on towards full lives and noble characters, and that has got to come, I say, by education. We

have no other way. We got to live and learn--and think, that's it.

(He strides in front of the old woman, who has dozed off again under his eloquence. She raises her head with a jerk when he thunders at her.) A few short years ago the white man's power covered us like the night. Through war and destruction we was freed. But it was freedom of the body and not freedom of the mind. And what is freedom of the body without freedom of the mind? It means nothing. It don't exist.

(Throwing his arm out in a long gesture.) What we need is thinking people, people who will not let the body rule the head. And again I cry out, education. I been accused of wanting to make the Negro the equal of the white man. Been run from pillar to post, living in poverty because of that belief. But it is false. I never preached that doctrine. I don't say that the colored ought to be made equal to the white in society, now. We are not ready for it yet. But I do say that we have equal rights to educating and free thought and living our lives. With that all the rest will come.

(Pointing to the bookcase.) Them books there show it.

(Caught up in the dreams of his life, he pours out a roll of words and beats the air with his fist.)

Ladies and gentlemen, what's to hinder us from starting a great center of learning here, putting our time and our hope and money and labor into it and not into the much foolishness of this life. What little education I got was by lightwood knots, and after reading and studying all these years, I am just a little ways along. We must give the children of the future a better chance than we have had. With this one school-building we can make a good start. Then we can get more teachers later on, more equipment, and some day a library where the boys and girls can read about men that have done something for the world. And before many years pass we will be giving instruction in how to farm, how to be carpenters, how to preach, how to teach, how to do anything.

(Forgetful of his written page, he shouts.) And what will stop us in the end from growing into a great Negro college, a university, a light on a hill, a place the pride of both black and white?

(He stands a moment, lost in thought. Turning through the leaves of his speech, he looks towards Muh Mack, who sits hid under her bonnet.) Ain't that the truth, Muh Mack? Ain't it?

(Anxiously.)

They can't stand out against that, can they? Ain't that a speech equal to the best of the white, ain't it?

(He coughs.)

MUH MACK

Lord Jesus! You's enough to wake the dead. And you brung on your cough again.

ABE

(Fiercely.)

I tell you it's going through. I believe the people here are with me this time.

MUH MACK

Sounds like the same old tale.

(Bitterly.)

You's made them there speeches from Wilmington and Greensboro to I don't know where. It's foolishness, and you knows it.

(Abe arranges the leaves of his speech without listening to her.)
Time you's learning that white is white and black is black, and God made the white to allus be better'n the black. It was so intended from the beginning.

ABE

(Staring at her and speaking half aloud.)
We been taught and kept believing that for two hundred years.

(Blazing out.)

But it's a lie, a lie, and the truth ain't in it.

MUH MACK

(Going on in her whining, irritating voice.)
Yeh, all your life you's hollered Lord and followed Devil, and look what it's brung you to. If you'd a-put as much time on picking cotton lately as you has on that speech, you wouldn't have Mr. Lonnie down on you the way he is. The truth's in that all right.

ABE

(Trying to control his nervousness and anger.)
I ain't a farmer. My business is with schools.

(Hotly.)

Can't you learn nothing? You dribbling old-- Here for twenty years you've heard me talk the gospel and it ain't made no impression on you.

(He turns away and speaks to himself and the shadows of the room.)

That speech is so! It's so, and I got to speak it that-a-way.

(He looks about him with burning eyes and pleads as if with an unseen power.)

The truth's there. Can't you see it?

(His nostrils quiver and he goes on in a kind of sob, calling to the unbeliever hiding within the dark.)

God Almighty knows they ain't no difference at the bottom. Color hadn't ought to count. It's the man, it's the man that lasts.

(Brokenly.)

Give us the truth! Give us the truth!

(He coughs slightly, and a queer baffled look creeps over his face. For a moment he seems to sense ultimate defeat before a hidden unreachable enemy.)

MUH MACK

(Looking at the clock and snapping.)

Thought you's bound to be at the Quillie House by six o'clock. It's near about time. Get on, I wants my nap.

(She pours snuff into her lip and turns to her snoozing again. With a hurried look at the clock, Abe crams his speech into his pocket, gets a plug hat from the desk, and blows out the lamp. The room is filled with great leaping shadows from the darting flames of the fireplace.)

ABE

(At the door.)
You remember what I said about Douglass.

MUH MACK

Get on, get on.
(Whining sarcastically.)
Sure you'll be a light on the hill and the pride of the land--and you won't even let a poor old woman see her boy.

ABE

(Turning back.)
Damn him! If he puts his foot in this house he'd better not let me get hold of him. They ain't no man, flesh of my flesh or not, going to lie rotten with liquor and crooks around me. That's what I been talking against for twenty years. I drove him off for it, and I'd do it again. Just because a little time's passed ain't no reason I've changed.

MUH MACK

He mought a-changed and want to do better.

ABE

(Coming back into the room.)
Changed enough so he like to got arrested in town yesterday and it his first day back.

MUH MACK

(Pleading in a high quavering voice.)
But I got to see him. He's been gone two year.

ABE

Let him come if he dares. You ruint him with your tales and worthless guitar playing and I don't want nothing more to do with him.

MUH MACK

(Mumbling toherself.)
I's gwine see him before he goes 'way back wonder if I has to crawl slam over the river.

ABE

(With brightening eye.)
You heard me. He ain't no longer mine, and that's the end of it.

MUH MACK

(Bursting into a rage.)
And you ain't none o' mine. You's got all the high notions of old Colonel Mack and the white folks and don't care nothing for your own. Get on.
(He stands looking at the floor, hesitating over something.)
What you scared of, the dark?

ABE

(Shuddering and going across the room and getting an old overcoat from a nail.)

Yes, I'm afraid of it. You're right, I'm none of yours, nor my own mother either. You know what I am--no, I dunno what I am. Sometime I think that's the trouble.

(Sharply.)

No, no, the trouble's out there, around me, everywhere around me.

(The despondent look comes back to his face and he speaks more calmly.)

I'll cut across the fields the near way. And tell Goldie not to worry. I'll be back by ten with the school as good as started.

(At the door he turns back again and calls to the old woman earnestly.)

Muh Mack, don't let her worry, don't.

(But the old woman is asleep.)

Let her sleep, let us all sleep.

(He goes out softly, closing the door behind him.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 6

An hour later the same evening. A sandy country road twists out of the gloom of scrubby oaks and bushes at the rear and divides into a fork, one branch turning sharply to the left and the other to the right. The moon has risen in the east, casting a sickly drunken light over the landscape through the flying clouds. To the left in a field of small loblolly pines the dim outline of a barn can be seen. The tops and the branches of the larger trees move like a vast tangle of restless arms, and the small bushes and grasses hug the earth under the wind's blustering. Down the road in the distance come the sounds of running footsteps, and farther off, almost out of hearing, the halloo as of someone pursuing. The footsteps thump nearer, and presently Abe staggers up out of the darkness and falls panting in the edge of the bushes at the right. His hat is gone and his clothes torn. The shouts sound fainter in the night and gradually die away. Abe crawls to his knees and stares back at the road, his breath coming in great gasps.

ABE

Reckon, reckon they leave me alone now, the damn cut-throats!

(Holding his sides with his hands and rocking his head in pain.)

Oh, my breast feel like it'll bust. Yeh, I outrun you, you poor white trash.

(Clambering wildly to his feet and staring up the road.)

But you done fix me now. You done got all the underholt and lay me on the bottom.

(Looking up at the sky and raising his fist above his head.)

There that moon looking on it all so peaceful like. It don't know, it can't feel what they done to me.

(Bursting out with a loud cry.)

Them white sons of bitches! They don't give me no chance. They stop every crack, nail up every door and shut me in. They stomp on me, squash me, mash me in the ground like a worm.

(His voice breaking into a sob.)

They ain't no place for me. I lost, ain't no home, no 'biding place.

(He throws himself down on the ground and lays his cheek to the earth.

Unseen by him a light begins to twinkle at the barn. He sits up and looks intently at the ground.)

Seem like this earth feel sweet to me. It warm me like it feel sorry.

(Laying his hand on it as if it were a being.)

Ground, you is my last and only friend. You take me in, you keep me safe from trouble. Wish I could dig me a hole now and cover me up and sleep till the judgment day, and nobody never know where I gone.

(Lonnie McGranie, stout and middle-aged, comes in at the left with a heavy lantern.)

LONNIE

Heigh there!

ABE

(Bounding up.)

Keep back, whoever you is. Stay back there, white man.

(Peering forward.)
Who's that cutting up crazy here in the night?

LONNIE

Ain't nobody, nobody.

ABE

Well, by God, Abe, what's the matter?

LONNIE

That you, Mr. Lonnie?

ABE

Yeh. What'n the world's the matter? I was out there at the barn and heard the awfulest racket. Somebody talking like they was crazy.

LONNIE

Trouble, Mr. Lonnie, trouble.

ABE

Trouble? What sort of trouble?
(Coming closer and holding up his light before Abe.)
Great goodness, you're wet as water.

LONNIE

(Straightening up.)
I all right now. Got to go on.
(He takes a drunken step on the road towards the right. Lonnie gets quickly before him.)

ABE

Where you going?

LONNIE

I going to leave here, going clean away.

ABE

No, you're not. Tell me what's the matter.

LONNIE

Them white men run me away from the Quillie house.

ABE

That's what the shouting was about, was it?

LONNIE

Maybe so, suh.

ABE

Uh-huh. You were down there about your school business, anh?

LONNIE

ABE

I wern't doing no harm. I was going to talk to the folks about our school for next year, and when I got there they was a crowd of low-down white men there--

LONNIE

Look out, mind how you talk.

ABE

I minding all right. When I got there they done run them lazy darkies off and told me I had to go.

(Grimly.)

They couldn't scare me though. I went on in the house and started my speech. And then--

(Throwing out his arms wildly.)

Mr. Lonnie, help me get back at 'em. Help me get the law on 'em.

LONNIE

What'd they do?

ABE

They fell on me and beat me and told me I got to get out of the country. And they run me off. But I reckon some of 'em got they heads cracked.

(His body swaying with weakness.)

What I going to do? I don't know what to do.

LONNIE

Go on home and behave yourself.

ABE

(His voice almost cracking.)

I ain't done nothing, I tell you.

LONNIE

(Roughly.)

Serves you right. I've told you time and again to quit that messing about and look after your crop and keep in your place. But you won't, you won't. I reckon you'll stay quiet now awhile.

ABE

(Pleading with him.)

But I done right. I ain't done nothing to be beat for.

LONNIE

The devil you ain't! I've been off today all around the country trying to get hands to pick your cotton. It's falling out and rotting in the fields.

ABE

But I ain't lost no time from the cotton patch, 'cepting two or three days and I was sick then. I been sick all today.

LONNIE

You needn't talk back to me. If you're sick what are you doing out tonight and getting yourself beat half to death? Yeh, I reckon I know such tales as that. And you needn't fool with the crop no more. I done levied on it and am going to have it housed myself.

ABE

(Moving towards him.)

You mean you took my crop away from me?

LONNIE

Don't talk to me like that, I tell you.

(A fit of coughing seizes Abe.)

Call it taking away from you if you want to, I'm done of you. Next year you can hunt another place.

ABE

(His face working in uncontrollable rage.)

Then you're a damn thief, white man.

LONNIE

(Yelling.)

Stop that!

ABE

(Moving towards him.)

Now I'm going to pay somebody back. I going to get even.

LONNIE

Stop! I'll kill you with this lantern.

ABE

(With a loud laugh.)

Yeh, yeh, hit me. Your time done come.

(He makes a movement towards Lonnie, who swings his lantern aloft and brings it crashing down on Abe's head. The light goes out and the two rocking forms are seen gripping each other's throats under the moon.)

LONNIE

Let go--let go--

(Abe gradually crushes him down to the ground, choking him.)

ABE

(Gnashing his teeth and snarling like a wild animal.)

I choke you, I choke your guts out'n your mouth.

(He finally throws Lonnie's limp body from him, and then falls upon it, beating and trampling the upturned face.)

There you lie now. Dead!

(His voice trails high into a croon.)

I wipe out some the suffering of this world now!

(Standing up and drawing away from the body.)

I--I--get even, I pay 'em back.

(He begins wiping his hands feverishly upon his trousers.)

Blood! Blood, the white man's blood all over me.

(Screaming out in sudden fear.)

I done killed somebody! Oh, Lord, Mr. Lonnie! Mr. Lonnie!

(He falls on his knees by the body.)

What's the matter? Wake up, wake up!--Pshaw, he's asleep, fooling.

(Springing to his feet.)

He's dead, dead!

(The wind groans through the trees like the deep note of some enormous fiddle and then dies away with a muffled boom across the open fields.

Abe stands frozen with horror.)

Listen at that wind, will you! Mercy, that his spirit riding it and crying!

(He falls prone upon the earth moaning and rocking. In a moment he sits up and holds his head tightly in his hands.)

O--oh, seem like my head done turned to a piece of wood, seem like cold as ice.

(He slaps his forehead queerly with his own palms.)

The whole world done seem turned upside down, everything going round me like a wheel.

(As he stares wonderingly around and gropes before him like one dreaming, the branches of the trees seem to change their shape and become a wild seething of mocking, menacing hands stretched forth from all sides at him. He snatches up a piece of broken fence rail and snarls at them.)

Don't touch me, I kill you!

(He stands in an attitude of defense and the branches seem to regain their normal appearance. Stupefied, he lets the rail fall to the ground and then wraps his arms spasmodically across his face.)

O Lord, I going crazy, that's what!

(He bends over, jerking and shivering. Presently out of the underbrush at the left steal two shadowy figures dressed in the fashion of the late fifties. One is a young good-looking negress of twenty, the other a dandified young white man about thirty. As they move across the scene at the rear, the man looks guiltily around him as if in fear of being surprised. The woman stops and points to the thicket at the right. He nods and motions her to move on, his arm around her. Abe looks up and sees them stealing away. He leaps to his feet and stares at them.)

Who that woman and white man?

(With a joyous cry he rushes forward.)

Mammy! Mammy! That you! This here's Abe, your boy! Mammy!

(The figures begin entering the thicket.)

Mammy! That you, Colonel Mack? Where you going? Stay here, help me, I--

(The man and the woman disappear into the bushes. Abe stands with his mouth open, staring after them.)

What's all this? Must be another dream--a dream. Sump'n quare.

(He moves cautiously forward and parts the bushes and starts back with a loud oath.)

God damn 'em! There they like hogs!

(The fearful truth breaks upon him and he shrieks.)

Stop it! Stop that, Mammy, Colonel Mack!

(Rushing towards the bushes again and stopping as if spell-bound.)

Stop that, I tell you, that's me! That's me!

(He stumbles backward over the body of Lonnie McCranie and, shrieking, rushes down the road at the left.)

THE SCENE FADES OUT

SCENE 7

Thirty minutes later, Douglass has arrived and with Muh Mack before the cabin fire is giving an account of his travels. He is now about nineteen years old, and has developed into a reckless dissipated youth dressed in the cheap flashy clothes of a sport.

DOUGLASS

(Turning towards Muh Mack with a bitter smile.)
Yeh, I says it and I says it again. Let them there Norveners put Pap in print for what he's trying to do for the colored. If they could see him now down a poor dirt farmer they'd not think he's such a smart man. Let him read his books and get new ideas. They won't change the black in him, not by a damn sight. He's right down working a tenant and that's where he belongs. Get me? And him off tonight making his speeches. I bet to Christ this here's his last 'un.

MUH MACK

For God's sake don't carry on so. Come on and tell me some more about the places you been since you left here.

(He sits looking in the fire.)

What--what's the matter? You hain't been usual so ficey-like with your Pap. You been drinking?

DOUGLASS

(Laughing sweetly.)

Yeh, I been drinking. And I got cause to cuss the whole works out.

(Looking at her fiercely.)

Listen here. Let this slip in your ear. For you'd hear it soon enough. You never has swung a eight-pound hammer, steel driving day after day in the broiling sun, has you? And you hain't never done it with a ball and chain on you 'cause you is marked dangerous, has you? and that for a whole year long? Well, I has.

MUH MACK

(In astonishment.)

You been on the roads since you left?

DOUGLASS

(Recklessly.)

I has that and wore the convict clothes just 'cause in my drunkenness I begun to preach some of his doctrines about there being no difference 'twixt the colored and the white. I knowed better. But I was drunk and had heard so many of his speeches. The judge in Wilson said he'd just stop my mouth for a month, and show me the difference. And I got a knife one day and stobbed a guard to the hollow. And they give me twelve months for that.

MUH MACK

(Admiring his prowess.)

You always was one what fought at the drap of the hat.

DOUGLASS

(Disgustedly.)

Yeh, a damn fool, and I ain't forgit how he run me off'n here and beat me!
(Bursting out with shining eyes.)

Hain't I got cause to hate him and want to get him down?

MUH MACK

Getting on the roads ain't much, Douglass.

DOUGLASS

No, it ain't much to lie in the jug, is it? You do it and you ain't never gwine have no more peace. The cops is allus watching you. You gets the look and they knows you. They tried to arrest me yesterday over there in Lillington, and I hadn't done nothing. And the old man was knowing to it too. But I's learnt what he'll never learn and it's this--that we belongs down with the pick and the sledge hammer and the tee-iron and the steam shovel, and the heavy things--at the bottom doing the dirty work for the white man, that's it. And he ain't gonna stand for us to be educated out'n it, neither. He's gonna keep us there. It pays him to. I sees it. And after all these years Pap keeps on trying to teach that men is men. Some white man's gonna shoot his lights out one these days, see if they don't.
(With reckless forgetfulness.)

And so I says gimme a fast time, a little gin to drown down all my troubles in, and then--

(He goes over to thebor and gets his guitar.)

--a little music to top it off with. How about it, Muh Mack?

MUH MACK

(Straining her eyes through the shadows.)

What you got there?

(Jubilantly.)

Lord, Lord! If you ain't brung your box with you! And I ain't heared nothing but them sparrows by the door and that old rain crow in the hollow since you left two year back. Play her, boy, play her.

(By this time he has sat down by the fire strumming.)

DOUGLASS

(Tuning up while Muh Mack sits in a quiver of excitement.)
Lemme play your old piece. My woman in Rocky Mount said 'twas the onliest tune.

MUH MACK

That's it! That's it! Lord, gimme the "Band." I used to be put in the middle every time for that step. Dance all day, dance all night, just so I's home by the broad daylight. Child, I could natch'ly knock the wool off'n 'em.

(As Douglass plays she chuckles and whines with delight and almost rises from her seat. He starts in a quiet manner gradually working up to a paroxysm of pantomime and song. Muh Mack begins doing the Jonah's Band Party step with her heels and toes while sitting. Douglass spreads his wriggling feet apart, leans forward with closed eyes, and commences the "call," with the old woman's quavery slobbering voice giving the "response.")

CALL

Such a kicking up sand!

RESPONSE

Jonah's band!

(This is repeated, then comes the command to change steps.)

Hands up, sixteen, and circle to the right,
We's gwine get big eatings here tonight.

Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!
Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!

Raise your right foot, kick it up high,
Knock that Mobile buck in the eye.

Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!
Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!

Stand up, flat-foot. Jump them bars.
Karo backwards like a train of cars.

Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!
Such a kicking up sand! Jonah's band!

Dance round, woman, show 'em the p'int,
Them other coons don'ter how to conj'int.

(By this time Douglass is playing a tattoo on the wood of his box and carrying on the tune at the same time. Muh Mack has risen from her chair. With her dress to her knees, defying her years, she cuts several of the well-remembered steps. At sight of her bare and thin dry shanks the delirious Douglass bursts into loud mocking guffaws and only plays faster. The door opens at the right and Goldie comes timidly in. Her face is worn and haggard, and the strained vacant look in her eyes has deepened. Muh Mack stops and creeps guiltily to her chair. Douglass tapers off his music and stops. For a moment Goldie stands astonished in the door, holding a bulky tow sack in her hand. She drops the sack and hurries over to Douglass.)

GOLDIE

Mercy me! I knowed 'twas you soon's I heard the guitar. And such carrying-ons!

DOUGLASS

(Rising confusedly as she comes up to him.)

How you, Mom?

(She puts her hand shyly on his arm and then clings convulsively to him, her shoulders heaving with restrained sobs. He lays one arm around her and stands looking tenderly and somewhat foolishly down at her. It is evident that in his way he cares for her. She suddenly raises her head, dries her eyes with her apron, and fetches wood from the box.)

GOLDIE

(Punching the fire.)

Whyn't you let me know Douglass had come, Muh Mack?

MUH MACK

He just come.

DOUGLASS

(Laying his box on the bed.)

Mom, you set in this chair. You must be cold.

(She sits down wearily, and he stands with his back to the fire. Muh Mack picks up her snuff-brush and slyly begins to dip from her tin box.)

GOLDIE

(With a sudden start of terror.)

You hain't seed your Pap, has you?

DOUGLASS

No'm, I ain't seed 'im. I found out he done gone to the Quillie house 'fore I come. I slipped in here and found Muh Mack asleep. Lord, I scared her with a fire coal.

GOLDIE

(Suddenly reaching out and clutching his hand to her face.)

Don't you and your Pap have no trouble. Don't egg him on. He--he--ain't well and might rile easy. We--we can see one 'nother off -- you and me.

DOUGLASS

Oh, I'm gonna be partic'lar. Now don't worry no more. It's all right.

GOLDIE

(Slowly getting up.)

You all set while I fix some supper. I got something good for Abe and the rest of us. Lemme show you.

(She brings the bag, sits down in the chair and takes out a big meaty ham-bone. Muh Mack eyes it hungrily--naively.)
Ain't that the finest though? And I got a hog head, too, and collards and cracklings.

DOUGLASS

(Angrily.)

That's the way with them damn--with them white folks. They works you to death and then shoves they old skippery meat off on you for pay.

GOLDIE

(A worried look coming over her face.)

You hadn't ought to say that, Douglass, Mr. Lonnie gave me it--all of it. And he paid me cash for my work. Abe'll have a new bottle of medicine Monday.

(She fingers the food childishly, and Douglass turns away with a smothered oath. Putting the food back into the bag, she stands up.)
Now I'll get you some supper.

DOUGLASS

I can't stay for no supper. I promised to eat down the road with Joe Day. Let's sit and talk, 'cause we don't have much time and you can cook after I'm gone.

GOLDIE

(Hesitating.)

Well--lemme put these here in the kitchen then.

(She goes out at the right.)

DOUGLASS

(Turning sharply to Muh Mack.)

What's the matter with Mom?

MUH MACK

Weren't we just a-having of a time when she broke in?

DOUGLASS

Cut out the damn jowing. What makes Mom act so quare?

MUH MACK

(Surprised.)

Do how? She acts all right.

DOUGLASS

She don't. She acts sort of lost like--wrapped up in something.

(He scratches his head perplexed.)

MUH MACK

If they's anything wrong with her it's 'count of trouble, I reckon.

DOUGLASS

The hell-fired fool! He's drug her to death with his wildishness.

MUH MACK

And if it's trouble that ails her, I reckons as how you's done your share in bringing it on.

(He swallows his reply as Goldie comes in. She lights the lamp, then sits down and begins staring in the fire.)

DOUGLASS

(After turning from one side to the other.)

Mammy, what's the matter with you?

GOLDIE

(Brushing her hand across her face and looking up as she wipes the tears from her eyes.)

Lord bless you, child, they ain't nothing. I's just happy to be with you. (She catches his hand and holds it a moment, then drops it and begins to look in the fire again. Douglass watches her intently and then turns away as if somewhat awed by her manner. There is a noise of someone coming up on the porch.)

MUH MACK

(Crying out in fear.)
That's him, Douglass! I know his step. That's your Pap.
(Goldie stands up, wringing her hands as Douglass gets his guitar and hurries into the kitchen. The door at the left opens and Abe enters.)

GOLDIE

(Leaning forward and rousing the fire.)
Did everything turn out--
(Muh Mack suddenly screams. Goldie looks up and cries out.)
Oh!
(Abe comes towards the fire. His face is bruised and bloody, his clothes torn to shreds, and he sways as he walks.)

MUH MACK

(Rising from her chair.)
They's been after him! They's been after him!

ABE

(Snarling at her.)
Shut up your damn yowling, will you? And don't be rousing the neighborhood.
I'm not dying yet.
(Goldie stands a moment terror-stricken and then runs up to him.)

GOLDIE

You's hurt, hurt bad, Abe, poor baby!

ABE

(Pushing her back.)
Ain't hurt much. No time to doctor me now.
(He stands before the fire as Muh Mack collapses in her chair.
He is no longer the reformer and educator, but a criminal, beaten and hunted.)
I come to tell you to get away--
(Panting.)
--to--to leave, leave!

GOLDIE

(Sobbing and burying her face in her hands.)
What's happened? What's happened?

MUH MACK

(Teetering in her chair and crying to herself.)
Lord-a-mercy on us! Lord-a-mercy!
(For a moment he stands before the women silent, with closed eyes.)

ABE

(Looking at the motto on the wall and repeating the words dully.)
We are rising!
(Echoing.)
We are rising!-- He didn't know what he said, he didn't.
(He staggers and grips the mantel and stands listening as if to far away sounds. He turns desperately to the cowering women.)
Get your clothes and leave. You got to go, I tell you everything's finished at the end.

GOLDIE

(Wailing.)

What happened at the schoolhouse?

ABE

(Pushing his bruised hand across his forehead.)

I can't, can't quite think--yeh, they was a crowd of white men at the door with masks and dough-faces on. Said weren't going to be no meeting. They beat me, run me off. And they give me till tomorrow to get out'n the country. You got to get away, for it's worsen' that--Oh, it is!

(Calmly and without bitterness.)

Who you reckon set 'em on me? Who you think it was told 'em about the trouble I been in before? Yeh, and he made it out terribler'n it was. Douglass told 'em. He done it. My own flesh and blood. No! No! he was but ain't no more!

(Gloomily.)

But I don't blame him--they ain't no blaming nobody no longer.

GOLDIE

(Fiercely.)

He didn't--he wouldn't turn against his own pa.

ABE

(Sternly.)

Hush! He did though. But it don't matter tonight. And you got to leave.

(Half-screaming and tearing at the mantel.)

Now! Now, I tell you!

GOLDIE

(Between her sobs.)

Did you--who hurt you?

ABE

I tell you I've done murder, and they's coming for me.

(Muh Mack sits doubled up with fear, her head between her arms.

With a sharp gasp Goldie ceases weeping and sits strangely silent.)

MUH MACK

Murder! Oh, Lord-a-mercy!

(She mumbles and sobs in her rag.)

ABE

They drove me away from the meeting. I come back by the road mad.

(He gasps.)

Every white man's hand against me to the last. And Mr. Lonnie come out to the road when I passed his house and begun to abuse me about the crop. He struck at me, and I went blind all of a sudden and hit him with my fist. Then we fought.

(His voice growing shrill.)

And I hit him and hit him. I beat his head in. I killed him dead, dead! I beat on and on until all the madness went out of me and the dark was everywhere. Then I seed a sight--

(He stops, aghast at the remembrance.)

I left the dead man there in the night on the ground. They done found him--I hear 'em crying on the road. They's coming to get me.

(He holds out his bruised hands.)

His blood's still shining on them hands.

(He turns his head away in fear.)

MUH MACK

(In a high whine of terror.)

My God a-mighty! You kill't your own flesh!

ABE

(Turning wrathfully upon her.)

Yeh, yeh, some bitch went a-coupling with a white man! My mother. I seed it--seed it--a soul being conceived in sin -- me -- and the curse of God upon me!

(He drops his hands helplessly. A sort of terror comes upon him.)
Oh, Lord God! I'm another Cain, and killed my brother. I tell you I-- I scrushed his head in and beat it till I put out the stars with blood. Mercy! Mercy.

(With his hands still held before him, he stands with bowed head. After a moment he looks up and speaks calmly, almost resignedly, his dignity coming back to him.)

This is the way it was meant to be, and I'm glad it's ended.

(He stands with his fist to his temples, and then flings out his arms in a wide gesture.)

Oh, but damn 'em! Don't they know I want to do all for the best.

(Shaking his fist at the shadows.)

I tell you, I tell you I wanted--I've tried to make it come right.

(Lowering his head.)

And now it's come to this.

(Douglass comes in from the kitchen and stands away from him, his face filled with shame and fear. Abe looks at him without interest.)

Before God, Pap, I--I didn't mean no such happenings. I never thought--

(Eyeing him coldly.)

ABE

Who you?

(More loudly.)

A leader, a king among men!

(To the women.)

Here's Douglass and you can go with him.

(Douglass turns back into the kitchen and instantly runs out. His eyes are staring with fear.)

DOUGLASS

(In a throaty whisper.)

Come on, Mom!

(Twisting his cap in terror.)

They's coming. I heard 'em from the kitchen door. They's coming.

Run, Pap! God have mercy!

(Muh Mack hobbles to Douglass and tries to pull him through the door at the right. He looks back towards his mother.)

MUH MACK

Come on! Come on!

DOUGLASS

Mom, Mom, don't stay here!

ABE

(Raising Goldie from her chair.)

Go on with him. You ain't to blame for nothing.

(He pushes her towards Douglass. But she turns and throws her arms around him, clinging silently to his breast.)

MUH MACK

(Pulling at Douglass.)

I hears 'em. That's them coming.

(With an anxious look at Goldie, Douglass hurries with Muh Mack through the door and into the fields. Abe places Goldie back in her chair and stands looking at her. He catches her by the shoulders and shakes her.)

ABE

Tell me, what is it, Goldie? What ails you, gal?

(She sits looking dumbly at him and he draws away from her. Presently there is a sound of stamping feet outside, and voices slip into the scene like the whispering of leaves. A stone is thrown against the house, then another and another. One crashes through the window and strikes the lamp. The room is left in semi-darkness. Abe with a sob of overwhelming terror falls upon his knees. Twisting his great hands together, he casts up his eyes and cries in a loud voice.)

God, God, where is you now! Where is you, God!

(He begins half sobbing and chanting.)

You has helped me before, help me now. Is you up there? Hear my voice!

(Fear takes possession of him.)

Blast me, Lord in your thunder and lightning, if it is your will! Catch me away in the whirlwind, for I'm a sinner. Your will, your will, not mine. Let fire and brimstone burn me to ashes and scatter me on the earth.

(Gasping.)

I've tried, I've tried to walk the path, but I'm poor and sinful--Give me peace, rest--rest in your bosom--if it is thy will. Save me, Jesus, save me!

(He falls sobbing on the floor.)

VOICE

(Outside.)

Come out of there, Abraham McCranie!

(A shudder runs through him, and his sobs grow less violent.)

Come out! Come out!

(Another stone crashes through the room. As if ashamed of his weakness, Abe rises from the floor. He speaks firmly to the shadows.)

ABE

In the beginning it was so intended.

(Looking around him.)

And I end here where I begun.

(He bursts out in a loud voice.)

Yet they're asleep, asleep, and I can't wake 'em!

VOICES

He's in there.
 I hear him talking.
 He's done talking now, Goddam him!
 We'll show him the law all right.
 He's got a gun!
 Shoot him like a dog.

ABE

(Wiping his brow and again speaking in the role of the educator trying to convince his everlastingly silent hearers.)
 But you'll wake, you'll wake--a crack of thunder and deep divided from deep--a light! A light, and it will be!
 (Goldie still sits hunched over in her chair. As he speaks he goes to the door at the left.)
 We got to be free, freedom of the soul and of the mind.
 (Shouting.)
 Freedom! Freedom!
 (Lifting up his voice.)
 Yea, yea, it was writ, "Man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble." Like the wind with no home. Ayh, ayh, sinner man, sinner man--
 (He opens the door.)
 I go talk to 'em, I go meet 'em--

VOICE

Hell! Lookout! There he is!

ABE

Yea, guns and killings is in vain.
 (He steps out on the porch.)
 What we need is to--to--
 (His words are cut short by a roar from several guns. He staggers and falls with his head in the doorway.)
 --and we must have--have--
 (At the sound of the guns, Goldie springs to her feet. For an instant everything is still. Then several shots are fired into Abe's body.)

VOICE

Quit the shoorting. He's dead as a damned door! Now everybody get away from here--no talking, no talking. Keep quiet--quiet.
 (There is the sound of shuffling footsteps and men leaping the fence. Voices come back into the room.)

VOICES

Yeh, mum's it.
 He won't raise no more disturbances!
 (The voices grow more faint.)
 What a bloody murder he done!
 He's still now, by God!
 It's the only way to have peace, peace.
 Peace, by God!
 (Goldie moves towards the door where Abe lies. Halfway across the room she stops and screams and then drops down beside his body. The wind blows through the house setting the sparks flying.)