

"Sweat" by Zora Neale Hurston

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## ZORA NEALE HURSTON

1891–1960

Although all of her books appeared in the 1930s, Zora Neale Hurston was undoubtedly a product of the Harlem Renaissance as well as one of its most extraordinary writers. Some readers first encounter Hurston as a rather disconcerting figure in Langston Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), where Hughes depicts her as a somewhat eccentric, even occasionally bizarre character with the nerve to approach strangers in Harlem and measure their heads as part of an anthropological inquiry. In Wallace Thurman's roman à clef *Infants of the Spring* (1932), she appears as Sweetie Mae Carr, a woman who fundamentally cares nothing about art. For Alice Walker, however, as well as for thousands of Hurston's admirers, she is one of the greatest writers of the century. Walker has declared that if she were relegated to a desert island for the balance of her life with only ten books to sustain her, she "would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora's." Walker's choices, *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), are beyond question two of the finest achievements in African American literature.

Nevertheless, Hurston remains one of the more mysterious figures in that literature. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), she addressed the matter of her birth itself with characteristic aplomb: "This is all hearsay. Maybe some of the details of my birth as told me might be a little inaccurate, but it is pretty well established that I really did get born." For years, misled by Hurston herself, scholars set the year of her birth as 1901, when in fact she was born a decade earlier, on January 7, 1891. No scholar thus far has been able to account for this lost decade of Hurston's life. She was born and reared in Eatonville, Florida, the first black township to be incorporated in the United States. An extraordinary place by any reckoning, Hurston's hometown takes on an almost mythic quality in her fiction and autobiographical writing. In her view, the absence of whites not only kept Eatonville free of racism but also freed blacks to express themselves without reservation. She was also proud of her father's crucial role as mayor of and lawgiver to the town.

Despite the lively, comic stories of Eatonville, however, Hurston's childhood was far from perfect. Her parents' marriage was marred by tension, not least of all because of her father's many infidelities; and her mother died when Zora was only thirteen. When her father married again, she clashed repeatedly with her stepmother. Apparently, Hurston left school and was shuffled back and forth between relatives. Of the odd jobs she took to support herself in the years that followed, the most important took her away from Eatonville, when she became the personal maid of a kindly white actress in a traveling theatrical troupe. In Baltimore, Hurston left her employer and

returned to school. She earned her high school diploma from Morgan Academy in 1918, then studied sporadically at Howard University between 1918 and 1924. In Washington, D.C., she came to know such literary figures as Alain Locke and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Locke paved the way for her migration to New York when he urged her to submit "Drenched in Light" to the editor of *Opportunity*, Charles S. Johnson, who published her story there in December 1924.

Arriving in New York City in 1925, Hurston soon established herself as one of the brightest of the young artists in Harlem. Her short play *Color Struck* (which would later appear in *Fire!!*, the magazine she co-founded with Hughes and a number of others) and her story "Spunk" (which appeared in the June 1925 issue of *Opportunity*) brought her to the attention of the novelist Fannie Hurst and the philanthropist Annie Nathan Meyer. Hurst hired Hurston as her personal secretary, and Meyer made it possible for Hurston to attend Barnard College.

While a student at Barnard, from which she graduated in 1928, she wrote a paper that her instructor passed on to Franz Boas, undoubtedly the foremost figure in anthropology in the United States at the time. Boas, then at Columbia University, was so impressed by her work that he convinced her to start graduate study in anthropology at Columbia. In turn, Hurston was thrilled by Boas's interest in the folktales (known to herself and the people who told them simply as "lies") that had kept her spellbound as a child in Eatonville. With a \$1,400 grant and Boas's intellectual and moral support, Hurston returned to her native South. Also important to Hurston's development as a folklorist was Charlotte Mason, the wealthy, elderly white woman who also befriended and aided Hughes and Alain Locke as well as other writers and artists.

With Mason's support, Hurston was able to gather the material that would later comprise *Mules and Men* (1935), generally regarded as the first collection of African American folklore to be compiled and published by an African American. *Mules and Men* received mixed reviews, with some black critics complaining that it was too easy on whites. According to Sterling A. Brown, for instance, Hurston's collection was "too pastoral" and would have been "nearer the truth" if it had been "more bitter." Nevertheless, the book was a popular success. Less successful was her second book of folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938), which she began after joining the Depression-inspired Works Progress Administration in 1935. Many readers were disappointed to find that the purported collection of folklore actually emphasizes a comparison between the intraracial barriers in black America and those in the Caribbean and makes relatively short shrift of the delightful tales that had made her first collection so endearing.

Hurston's trip to the Caribbean in connection with research on this book was also important because during her stay there she completed her second and finest novel: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), had been well received both by the critics and the public. The story of John Pearson, a Baptist minister who is unable to remain faithful to his wife between sabbaths, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is loosely modeled on the infidelities of Hurston's father, who was also a preacher. But as impressive as it is for a first novel, it probably prepared few readers for the book that was to follow. In its chronicle of Janie Crawford, a black woman who marries three times before she finds a man who is as concerned about her happiness as about his own, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* celebrates one individual's triumph over the limitations imposed on her mainly by sexism and poverty. Janie Crawford's ultimate attainment of contentment is based squarely on a mature understanding of life and of the acknowledgment of forces superior even to romantic love, which can blind women to the necessity of seeking emotional and intellectual independence as individuals in a complex world.

Throughout the 1930s, Hurston worked intermittently on musical productions that were generally based on the stories she collected in her travels. She also collaborated with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone*. But a quarrel with Hughes kept the two from working together, and the play was never professionally staged during Hur-

ston's lifetime. Her experience with the stage qualified her for a position as a drama instructor at the North Carolina College for Negroes at Durham, where she began working in 1939. Her third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, was published in November of that year. Most critics are perplexed by the book; typical of their ambivalent responses is the scholar Robert Hemenway's description of it as a "noble failure." Fascinating though this retelling of the Exodus story undoubtedly is, the transmuting of Israelites into African Americans and of Moses into a practitioner of hoodoo leaves many readers wondering whether Hurston was more interested in modernizing the biblical tale or parodying it. Nevertheless, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, like the two novels before it, has proved attractive enough to have remained in print.

In fact, the only one of Hurston's novels not readily available is her last, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), in which Hurston turns to the study of a fictional white woman, Arvay Henson. If many readers were surprised by this dramatic change in subject matter, Hurston herself had her reasons. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten she wrote, "I have hopes of breaking that old silly rule about Negroes not writing about white people." Her readers, though surprised, were probably not as troubled by her sudden breaking of that "silly" rule as her critics; and the book sold well despite many critics' fears that Hurston was perhaps turning her back on her race—a charge that was almost bound to be brought against her because of apparent inconsistencies in her views on race as she expressed them during the 1940s.

For Hurston, a new stage of her career and reputation began with the publication of her popular autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* in 1942, which led unquestionably to controversies and misconceptions concerning her. Even though Hurston's publisher had specifically requested an autobiography from her, he refused to publish the book she gave him because of several potentially objectionable passages in which Hurston indicts white America for its hypocrisy and racism. Without those passages, the book was published. *Dust Tracks on a Road* won Hurston the Anisfield-Wolf award for its contribution to the amelioration of race relations; it also won her the contempt of many black critics who considered it an unconscionably cheery portrayal of the life experience of a black woman in America. In other words, *Dust Tracks on a Road* failed (for these critics at least) precisely where *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had succeeded. Nevertheless, Hurston found herself solicited for articles by numerous magazines. Soon she was appearing in such publications as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Reader's Digest*, *American Mercury*, *World Telegram*, and *Negro Digest*. Her views were sometimes contradictory. In an article from 1943 she wrote that "the Jim Crow system works," but Hurston claimed just less than three years later that she was "all for the repeal of every Jim Crow law in the nation here and now." Ambivalence toward her deepened as the 1940s wore on, and she was probably relieved and a little surprised when *Seraph on the Suwanee* sold well.

But what might have been the beginning of a second phase in her career (it had been nearly a decade since the publication of her previous novel) was cut short by a personal calamity. In September 1948 Hurston was arrested on charges of having committed an immoral act with a ten-year-old boy. The fact that she had been out of the country when the crime was supposed to have taken place was not enough to keep the story out of the newspapers, and Hurston was humiliated. "My race," she wrote to Van Vechten, "has seen fit to destroy me without reason, and with the vilest tools conceived of by man so far." She never recovered from the incident, and wrote little in the remaining twelve years of her life. Discovered working as a cleaning woman in Florida in 1950, Hurston claimed unconvincingly that she was engaged in research for a piece she was planning to write about domestics.

Her brief stints of employment as librarian, reporter, and substitute teacher in the years that followed left her poor at her death in 1960, and her grave (in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida) was unmarked until 1973, when Alice Walker had a tombstone erected on the approximate location of the gravesite. The 1970s, in fact, saw a resurgence of interest in Hurston that continues to swell. Hurston has found

a new audience, one composed of people, especially women, far more ready than her contemporaries to accept the complex wisdom of this woman who refused to be "tragically colored." For Hurston, that refusal entailed not a denial of her race, but a joyful affirmation of infinite possibility in the scope of her own life.

### Sweat

It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida. It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a washwoman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

"Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes."

"Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it." He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. "If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you."

"You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it's a sin. Some day Ah'm gointuh drop dead from some of yo' foolishness. 'Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin' wid no bull whip."

"You sho is one aggravatin' nigger woman!" he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. "Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks' clothes outa dis house."

He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and set it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, *praying*, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

"Next time, Ah'm gointer kick 'em outdoors," he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

"Ah aint for no fuss t'night Sykes. Ah just come from taking sacrament at the church house."

He snorted scornfully. "Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain't nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout; then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath."

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

"Sykes, you quit grindin' dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat'day if Ah don't start on Sunday?"

"Ah don't keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don't gimme no lip neither, else Ah'll throw 'em out and put mah fist up side yo' head to boot."

Delia's habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knucky hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

"Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin' in washin' fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!"

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked brutally.

"What's it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo' belly with vittles more times than yo' hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin' in it."

She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did.

"Naw you won't," she panted, "that ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin' with aint comin' heah to pile up on *mah* sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin' on this place, and Ah'm gointer stay right heah till Ah'm toted out foot foremost."

"Well, you better quit gittin' me riled up, else they'll be totin' you out sooner than you expect. Ah'm so tired of you Ah don't know whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!"

A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knucky hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed. Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it

would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely.

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. *Amen*. She went to sleep and slept until he announced his presence in bed by kicking her feet and rudely snatching the covers away.

"Gimme some kivah heah, an' git yo' damn foots over on yo' own side! Ah oughter mash you in yo' mouf fuh drawing dat skillet on me."

Delia went clear to the rail without answering him. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did.

The week was as full of work for Delia as all other weeks, and Saturday found her behind her little pony, collecting and delivering clothes.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots<sup>1</sup> as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat.

"Heah come Delia Jones," Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came 'round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buckboard was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry.

"Yep," Joe Lindsay agreed. "Hot or col', rain or shine, jes ez reg'lar ez de weeks roll roun' Delia carries 'em an' fetches 'em on Sat'day."

"She better if she wanter eat," said Moss. "Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an' powder hit would tek tuh kill 'em. Not to *huh* he aint."

"He sho' aint," Walter Thomas chimed in. "It's too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he got huh. Ah'd uh mah'ied huh mahseff if he hadnter beat me to it."

Delia nodded briefly at the men as she drove past.

"Too much knockin' will ruin *any* 'oman. He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks," said Elijah Moseley. "How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he's layin' roun' wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock<sup>2</sup> couldn't kiss a sardine can Ah done thowed out de back do' 'way las' yeah."

"Aw, she's fat, thass how come. He's allus been crazy 'bout fat women," put in Merchant. "He'd a' been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a' found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh 'bout him come sidlin' roun' *mah* wife—bringin' her a basket uh peecans outa his yard fuh a present? Yeah, mah wife! She tol' him tuh take 'em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an' soapsuds. Ah jus' wisht Ah'd a' caught 'im 'roun' dere! Ah'd a' made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road."

"Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees 'im grinnin' at every 'oman dat passes," Walter Thomas said. "But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil' 'oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup!

1. The indigestible part of the sugarcane stalk.

2. The eight ball in pool, i.e., black.

Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh losin' huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband's duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind."

"There oughter be a law about him," said Lindsay. "He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear."

Clarke spoke for the first time. "Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in 'im. There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It's round, juicy an' sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat's in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats 'em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey thows 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hangin' after huh tell she's empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way."

"We oughter take Syke an' dat stray 'oman uh his'n down in Lake Howell swamp an' lay on de rawhide till they cain't say Lawd a' mussy. He allus wuz uh ovahbearin' niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done taught 'im how to run a automobile, he done got too biggety to live—an' we oughter kill 'im," Old Man Anderson advised.

A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

"Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an' slice it up for yo' customers. We'se all sufferin' wid de heat. De bear's done got *me!*"

"Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes' whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppi-zudicks,"<sup>3</sup> Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. "Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an' you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floridy favorite."

"A god, an' be dough. You all gimme twenty cents and slice way," Clarke retorted. "Ah needs a col' slice m'self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah'll lend y'll mah meat knife."

The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

"Come on in, Joe, an' gimme a slab uh sow belly an' uh pound uh coffee—almost fuhgot 'twas Sat'day. Got to git on home." Most of the men left also.

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

"Git whutsoever yo' heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two botles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an' a block uh chewin' gum."

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast.

"Where did Syke Jones git da 'oman from nohow?" Lindsay asked.

"Ovah Apopka.<sup>4</sup> Guess dey musta been cleanin' out de town when she lef'. She don't look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it."

"Well, she sho' kin squall," Dave Carter contributed. "When she gits ready

3. I.e., epizootic; any fast-spreading disease.

4. A town in Florida some ten miles from Hurston's birthplace, Eatonville.

tuh laff, she jes' opens huh mouf an' latches it back tuh de las' notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain't got nothin' on huh."

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Della Lewis'—the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to "stomps."<sup>5</sup> He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

"Sho' you kin have dat lil' ole house soon's Ah kin git dat 'oman outa dere. Everything b'longs tuh me an' you sho' kin have it. Ah sho' 'bominates uh skinny 'oman. Lawdy, you sho' is got one portly shape on you! You kin git *anything* you wants. Dis is *mah* town an' you sho' kin have it."

Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane<sup>6</sup> and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia's house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

"Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin'!"

She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

"Syke! Syke, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake 'way from heah! You *gottuh*. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!"

"Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin' uh de kin'—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin' but die. Taint no use uh you puttin' on airs makin' out lak you skeered uh dat snake—he's gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn't bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle 'im. Nohow he wouldn't risk breakin' out his fangs 'gin yo' skinny laigs."

"Naw, now Syke, don't keep dat thing 'roun' heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah'm even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill 'im Syke, please."

"Doan ast me tuh do nothin' fuh yuh. Goin' 'roun' tryin' tuh be so damn asterperious.<sup>7</sup> Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo' uh

5. Raucous dance parties.

6. The garden outside Jerusalem that was the scene of Jesus' agony and arrest (Matthew 26.36–57).

7. I.e., astorperious; haughty (possibly a fusion of *Astor*, the name of a wealthy family, and *imperious*, or arrogant).



him dan you! Dat's a nice snake an' anybody doan lak 'im kin jes' hit de grit."

The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

"How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Syke?" Thomas asked.

"He's full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how Ah eased up on 'm. But Ah'm a snake charmer an' knows how tuh handle 'em. Shux, dat aint nothin'. Ah could ketch one eve'y day if Ah so wanted tuh."

"Whut he needs is a heavy hick'ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat's de bes' way tuh charm a rattlesnake."

"Naw, Walt, y'll jes' don't understand dese diamon' backs lak Ah do," said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

"Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake 'way fum heah. You done starved me an' Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin' dat varmint heah."

Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

"A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin' no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh 'im tuh go. So fur as beatin' is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' *me*."

Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. "Ah hates you, Sykes," she said calmly. "Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat's de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an' moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge—so Ah don't haftuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don't wantuh see yuh 'roun' me atall. Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog."<sup>8</sup>

Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

"Well, Ah'm glad you does hate me. Ah'm sho' tiahed uh you hangin' ontuh me. Ah don't want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo' rawbony laigs an' arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby tuh *me*. You cain't hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin' *you* fuh years."

"Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak uh paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm

8. A dog that steals chicken eggs.

goin' tuh de white folks about *you*, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah."<sup>9</sup> Delia said this with no signs of fear and Sykes departed from the house, threatening her, but made not the slightest move to carry out any of them.

That night he did not return at all, and the next day being Sunday, Delia was glad she did not have to quarrel before she hitched up her pony and drove the four miles to Woodbridge.

She stayed to the night service—"love feast"—which was very warm and full of spirit. In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward,

"Jurden' water, black an' col'  
Chills de body, not de soul  
An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time."

She came from the barn to the kitchen door and stopped.

"Whut's de mattah, ol' satan, you aint kickin' up yo' racket?" She addressed the snake's box. Complete silence. She went on into the house with a new hope in its birth struggles. Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry! Fifteen years of misery and suppression had brought Delia to the place where she would hope *anything* that looked towards a way over or through her wall of inhibitions.

She felt in the match safe behind the stove at once for a match. There was only one there.

"Dat niggah wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough. Now he done toted off nigh on tuh haff uh box uh matches. He done had dat 'oman heah in mah house, too."

Nobody but a woman could tell how she knew this even before she struck the match. But she did and it put her into a new fury.

Presently she brought in the tubs to put the white things to soak. This time she decided she need not bring the hamper out of the bedroom; she would go in there and do the sorting. She picked up the pot-bellied lamp and went in. The room was small and the hamper stood hard by the foot of the white iron bed. She could sit and reach through the bedposts—resting as she worked.

"Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time." She was singing again. The mood of the "love feast" had returned. She threw back the lid of the basket almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, she sprang back toward the door. *There lay the snake in the basket!* He moved sluggishly at first, but even as she turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear, he began to stir vigorously. She saw him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed, then she seized the lamp and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. The wind from the open door blew out the light and the darkness added to her terror. She sped to the darkness of the yard, slamming the door after her before she thought to set down the lamp. She did not feel safe even on the ground, so she climbed up in the hay barn.

There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck.

9. "My cup runneth over," Psalm 23.5.

1. The river Jordan, mentioned in the Bible, signifies deliverance.

Finally she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

"Well, Ah done de bes' Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault."

She went to sleep—a twitch sleep—and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.

He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.

The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.

"Dat ol' scratch<sup>2</sup> is woke up now!" She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot—everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.

Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha's.

The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.

"Mah Gawd!" he chattered, "ef Ah could on'y strack uh light!"

The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.

"Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he'd be too sick"—Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes' ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed.

Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla. All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound.

A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows upon the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four-o'clocks and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.

She lay there. "Delia, Delia!" She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

"Mah Gawd!" She heard him moan, "Mah Gawd fum Heben!" She heard

2. A nickname of the devil; here refers to the serpent.

him stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, "Delia, is dat you Ah heah?"

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and his one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.