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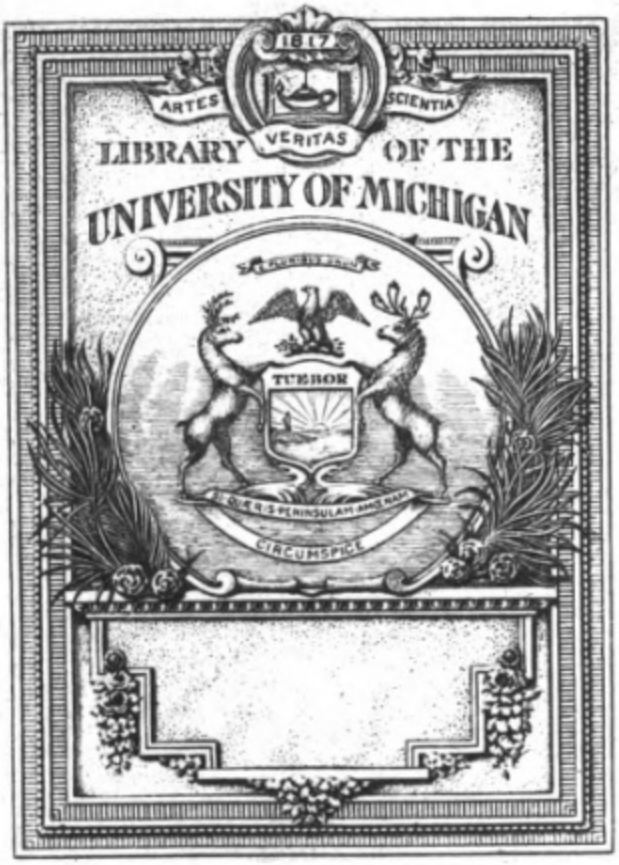

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BOOKS BY GEORGE W. LEE

BEALE STREET: WHERE THE BLUES BEGAN

RIVER GEORGE

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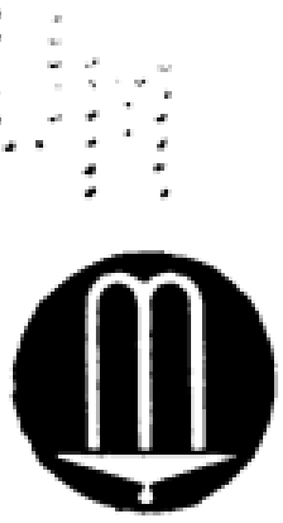
RIVER GEORGE

by

GEORGE W. LEE



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To
My Mother

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RIVER GEORGE

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CHAPTER I

THE train came slowly to a stop at the little wooden station of Holly Rock, and puffed restlessly as though it were really only hesitating here out of necessity and was bent on expressing the engineer's impatience to be on his way. The platform was deserted save for an old colored man who stood looking anxiously down the line of coaches to the car "for colored only." He was a squat figured man, yet this was less because he was actually short than that his breadth seemed to reduce his height, making him seem shorter than he really was. About his chin and upper lip a fringe of graying beard and mustache framed the fullness of his mouth which drooped a little at the corners as though it had become used to expressing sorrow. He wore no coat and the coarse blue shirt was patched and faded. Over it was tightly stretched the one remaining member of a pair of suspenders supporting the coarse working pants, patched in the knees and the seat. Surmounting his head was an old felt hat, the brim long twisted out of shape, and the peak, formed by the end of the crease in front, worn through in a ragged hole.

The station agent, seemingly as surprised at the train stopping here as the engine seemed restless to be on its way, came out of the waiting room and looked questioningly at the colored man.

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"Howdy, Uncle. You expecting somebody?" he asked in a friendly voice.

"Aaron comin' in on this train," the other replied quietly.

"All filled up with college talk, I suppose?" the station agent said, but the colored man made no reply.

The white man was feeling really friendly and, with no desire to offend the other, thrust one more remark across the gap which separated them, changing the subject lest it be left on an unpleasant note.

"How's old Henry this morning?" he asked.

"Po'ly," the colored man said quietly. "He cain't las'."

"Sorry to hear it," the white man answered but his concern was less than his curiosity.

He, too, watched closely as a tall, strong Negro boy, with great, clumping feet, and long, ape-like arms, hurried down the steps of the Jim Crow car holding a worn canvas-covered carry-all of the type known in the early years of this century as a telescope, and walked quickly to meet the older Negro.

Deep anxiety was written on the face of the younger man, a face that was as black as had been that of his great-grandfather brought to America as a slave from Africa. Although he was actually in his twenty-fifth year, an intelligent white person looking at him for the first time might have guessed that he was seventeen or thirty-five, for the ageless lineaments of the Negro race were upon him, the lost searching bright look of his eyes; the fullness of his lips; the depth of seriousness in his mouth, which was yet loose as if from laughter; the gangling length of his arms; the looseness

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of his hurried gait; the complete and unmarred rhythm of every movement which his body made as it crossed the platform.

His full six feet of height still further dwarfed the figure of the man beside him. For Aaron George, the boy, was as broad and as heavily boned and muscled as the other, yet had this increasing height to combine in making of him the figure of a large and powerful man.

The two men did not shake hands but, almost before either had spoken, started, as if by common consent, toward the street where a mule stood waiting hitched to an ordinary spring farm wagon. The younger man looked searchingly into the face of the older and asked the question which had been torturing him all the way along the hot dusty ride.

"How's Pa, Uncle Am?"

Amity George looked pityingly at his nephew.

"It don't 'peah that we know much about it, Aaron," he said softly.

Restraint gone for the moment, the younger man grasped his arm.

"You telling me true, Uncle Am?" he asked. "He ain't dead is he?"

"No boy," the other answered sorrowfully shaking his head. "I'm tellin' yo' only what God loves, the naked truth. We don' know how bad off he is. The doctor don' like his looks but he ain't daid yet."

Silently they climbed over the wheel to the hard seat of the spring wagon but when Amity George took up the two ends of rope, which served as reins, Aaron reached for them.

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"Let me drive ol' Sal, Uncle Am," he said. "Seems like I haven't had anything in my hands for a long time felt so good as these pieces of rope."

The older man's lips parted in a brief smile.

"Mus' be yo' don' like the feel of pencils and books in dose hands, Aaron?" he asked.

"It isn't that—"

The boy paused and looked ahead down the road over the bouncing back of the jogging mule.

"College is fine. I suppose it's the best thing that ever happened to me. Ain't ever a day there I don' stop and think how grateful I am to Pa an' Ma."

He paused again. It was strange how there beside his Uncle Amity, sitting up in the high seat behind old Sally, his speech wanted to drop back into the musical irregularities of his childhood. Three years of college had changed it markedly, just as they had changed his clothing from an outfit very similar to that which his uncle wore to this brown store suit, in need of pressing now, which hung on his huge frame awkwardly as if ill at ease, and this white shirt, soiled now by his trip, and the too large but uncomfortable collar and the somewhat gaudy tie at his throat. He looked slowly down at the palm of one hand and moved his fingers stiffly, tensing and flexing them.

"I got big hands, Uncle Am," he said slowly. "They always were used to doing hard work when I was a boy. Sometimes they seem a little lost when all they can get hold of is a book, and then it's good to get hold of these pieces of rope back of old Sally. But there's something else, too."

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He was thinking how good it was, even with the terror in his heart at the thought that his father might be dying, to be back here with his people, thinking how much more at ease he felt here than in the halls and classrooms of the college from which he had hurried to his father's bedside, thinking, that if needs must be, he could stay here with them happily, yet feeling in his heart too a great surge of that hope which every intelligent, sensitive, Negro knows at some time in his life—the hope that through education, through meeting and grasping truth, his race could be set free from a bitter bondage which did not end with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Old Sally, never slackening her slow jogging trot, was turning off the road now of her own accord, going surely without wavering, along the path her feet had trod for many years up to the door of a little ramshackle barn which stood 30 feet away from a house that was no larger nor less shabby. Dropping the reins and leaving his telescope behind him in his eagerness, Aaron jumped from the spring seat over the wheel and ran to the door of the house from which his mother was coming with an eagerness equal to his own.

She was a large woman, whose age would have been even more difficult to guess than Aaron's and in her fine round face struggled the conflict of her joy at the sight of her son and her grief at the fore-knowledge of her husband's death. With a little cry of happiness, he put his arms around her and, stooping his powerful body in a grotesque curve, he laid his head for a moment upon her large breast.

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"Ma!" he cried.

For a moment she held him thus, then taking his shoulders in her two powerful hands, hands which knew well the feel of a hoe and plow-handle, she raised his head gently and held him from her at arms' length, her eyes filled with tender gladness too great to be dimmed by her sorrow.

"Yo' make my eyes rich, son," she said.

For a moment, the boy rested his hand hard against one of the work roughened hands on his shoulder without speaking, his own eyes bright with unshed tears.

"How's pa?" he asked briefly, his voice none too steady.

Her eyes filled with pain at his words but neither they nor her answer evaded the question or the fact which she had already faced and accepted in the depths of her heart and mind, which had suffered too long from reality to attempt now to make any substitute for it.

"He's about to cross ovah, son," she said.

Her voice was scarcely above a whisper and filled with sorrow but there was no horror in it, no fear, only the calm acceptance of the fact that death, as well as life, is the common lot of man. Together they went into the house.

There were only two rooms here, the kitchen with its worn old stove, the top of which sagged a little above the fire-box, and the bedroom beyond it. Over the stove in the kitchen hung a great skillet, flanked by half a dozen pans shining from their many scourings with wood-ashes. Across the room from the stove stood

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a home-made pine table. There was no cloth on it, but like the pans, the top was clean and bright from frequent, repeated scrubbings. Three kitchen chairs, two of them without backs, stood near the table on a floor as spotless as the rest of the room, and in a corner was a little stand. On it stood a pail of cold spring water. Above the stand on the wall were three home made shelves, which held the little stock of store dishes that were the pride of Hannah George's heart.

As Aaron entered the door, this room which he knew so well seemed to embrace him and bring him peace. But he didn't pause here. Without a word, he hurried through the low door into the bedroom beyond, where his father lay dying. For a moment, unable to speak, the boy towered over the silent man lying there and the other, in that state of dim consciousness which, for the desperately ill, is a softening of the way through the gate of death, did not sense his presence. Then with a little moan of sorrow which he couldn't restrain, Aaron dropped on his knees by the bedside and took in his own the knotted hand which lay on the covers.

"Pa!" he cried.

Slowly the older man's eyes opened as if with a weariness too great for even the effort of lifting the lids, and the lines in his lips softened in welcome.

"Yo' here, Aaron?" he asked weakly. "I tol' yo' Ma not to bothuh to sen' fo' yo'."

"She didn't send, Pa," Aaron defended her. "Uncle Am wrote and told me. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else with you sick, Pa. I'm going to help Ma

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take care of you and we'll have you out of bed in a week."

He tried to smile but he knew, even as he had spoken to his father, that it was no use to pretend. Now the older man raised his hand feebly and rested it for a moment on his son's bowed head.

"No, son," he said. "I'se gwinen home. Don' yoll grieve after me. I'se made my peace."

He paused for a moment and then looked closely at his son.

"They's sometin' yo' can do fo' me, Aaron. I ain't like to speak to yo' Ma about it 'cause it aint good to hurt her talkin' 'bout death, but lying heah I done thought where I wants to be buried. Hit's undah dat willow back of de church, close by my Ma's grave. Yo' take care o' dat, Aaron."

Tears were streaming down the boy's face but he didn't try longer to evade. He patted his father's arm gently and reassured him.

"Yes, Pa," he said. "I'll take care of it."

His father sighed and his voice was lower as he spoke.

"Yo's a good boy, Aaron," he said. "Take care of yo' Ma and don' forget all we tried to teach yo'. Yo' got learnin' now just like a white man. Take care yo' use it right."

"Yes, Pa," Aaron answered and the other's hand slipped weakly from his head to lie motionless on the bed while the tired eyes closed once more.

"Hits good to have yo' heah, Aaron," the old man whispered. "I guess I was jus' waitin' fo' yo' to come.

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Yo' might sing something now while I can still heah yo'."

"What shall I sing, Pa?"

"Might sing 'Fare Thee Well,' Aaron, I allus did like it. My mammy used to sing dat song."

Aaron's eyes closed against the insistent tears which forced themselves under his lids, and for a moment he knelt there silently fighting to regain control of his voice. Then he began to sing softly in a rich baritone voice. His mother, coming noiselessly through the door, stood beside him and then kneeling, waited quietly, her head on the bed close to the hand of her husband, as their son's rich, deep voice laid a blanket of comforting sound over them.

Oh, fare thee well, my brother,
Fare thee well, by the grace of God
For I'se gwinen home.
I'se gwinen home, my Lord,
I'se gwinen home;
Marse Jesus give me a little broom,
For to sweep my heart clean;
Sweep 'em clean by the grace of God
And the glory in my soul!

When he had finished, the older man was breathing quietly as though asleep. For a moment Aaron watched, then leaning closer to his mother he put his arm about her shoulders and kissed lightly the back of her bowed head before he rose and tip-toed from the room leaving them alone with each other for this unfathomable parting.

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CHAPTER II

AARON GEORGE stood on a little hill looking over the wide fields of Beaver Dam Plantation, the home of his childhood, the place in which he had learned those first slow truths about life in a world in which his black skin had made him different from his white masters. Gray dusk was settling over the fields and the little patch of timber to the east. Above him the first stars were glimmering and there was a cool sweet perfume in the air as if the earth itself, parched from the long sunburned day, had breathed a fragrant sigh as the sun descended. Below him, in the cottage where his father lay dead, the voices of his friends were raised in song. Aaron knew, for he had just left them, that the little bedroom was crowded with the sorrowing neighbors, that the kitchen was likewise filled, and from where he stood he could see a little group outside the opened door, leaning against the door casing, their heads bowed, their voices chanting with the rest. His own lips moved slightly as he listened, but no sound came to join the monotonous rhythm of the song that was floating up from the house.

Death ain' yo' got no shame,
Shame,
Death ain' yo' got no shame,
Shame.

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Over and over the same words in the same melody, the same monotonous wailing rhythm. At the focal point of sound in the heart of that sorrowing group, he knew that his mother knelt at the bedside of the man whose life she had shared shoulder to shoulder with perfect loyalty and devotion for 30 years. But he knew, too, that she was not weeping now. Her tears had been shed in that moment when she had felt the cold hand of death brushing her own face as it rushed by her to touch her husband. She would not weep again, but her voice, as strong as the rest, would continue all night long to join the others in song. Now the song, dropped first by one voice and then another, gradually tapered off into silence and there was no sound anywhere in the world for the moment save the barking of a dog down the road at another cottage similar to that below him which housed death. Then a single voice from the group below was lifted in the first line of another song, a song full of power and triumph, a song before whose magnificence terror fled, leaving only awe and a sense of the greatness of this messenger who had visited them.

O the sperit said I want yo' for to
Go down Death,
Easy!
I want you go down Death,
Easy!
I want yo' go down Death,
Easy!
And bring my servant home.

Go down Death!
Go down!
Preach my glory and my mighty name;

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I want yo' go down!
I want yo' go down!
And bring my servant home!

Many times as a child Aaron had listened to these meetings held beside the cold, still form of one whose spirit had fled and then they had only stimulated a sense of wonder and mystery in him for he had not known the deep meaning of grief. Now, with sorrow lying like a heavy hand on his heart, he saw the true meaning of these songs which were less expression of pain than of welcome, less a complaint against the bitterness of loss than a formal greeting to do proper honor to a distinguished and mighty guest. Loving life more fully and vibrantly than the less vital race of white men who were their masters, his people had learned as none other to look forward with certainty to the eventual coming of one more powerful than they, more powerful even than their white overlords, more powerful than life itself. And they knew that he deserved honor and were prepared to give it. Death to them was more than a fact, it was a personality, one whose might stimulated worship even more than his weaker brother life. And they knew too, that although he brought pain for those whom he ignored, to the one for whom he had come he brought release from pain and a final peace.

His father more than any one he had ever known, unless it was his mother, deserved that peace. Aaron could not mourn for him now. He could only, with the rest, bow his head in honor to the one who had brought release to this good man and hope that his own strength

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would be sufficient for the new burden that would be put on him. For he knew, as he had known when he read the penciled laconic letter from his Uncle Amity, that his cherished days at college were over. His father and mother had worked so hard for those days, had hoped so painfully, and waited so long. Bit by bit, over the years which stretched behind him, they had saved such money as they occasionally received and stored it away to bulwark their determination that their son could stand intellectually shoulder to shoulder with white people. Yet it had always seemed hopeless until three years before. Aaron's grandfather, dying in Texas, where he had been fortunate enough to get a little farm which he had later sold to a white oil producer, had left $500.00 to Aaron's father. This, with the amount of money which had been saved, had paid for the three years Aaron had spent at a colored university, and there was a little left, which was to have been the nucleus for his fourth year. But now, although neither his mother nor he had spoken of it in the three days since he had been home, the three days during which they had waited for his father to die, Aaron knew that he must take his father's place and carry on the thankless, heartbreaking work of a share-cropper on the Beaver Dam Plantation.

In the past, which Aaron had left behind him when he went away to college, things had been different and better and Aaron would have had little to fear if the old owner, John King, still held the place. For in those days, a vicious share-cropper system open to so much abuse on the part of the white overlords and offering so

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little recourse against wrong to the negroes was, nevertheless, administered with kindliness and an underlying sense of justice. But since King had sold the plantation, the negroes had been in as sorry a state as their ancestors had been under slavery. For a long time it had troubled Aaron, while he had felt happy and secure himself in the friendly confines of college walls, to think of his father and mother and friends at home suffering under the yoke imposed by the new owner.

In college he learned a great many things besides dates in history and reactions in test-tubes of the chemical laboratory, and one of them, the thing which had impressed him more deeply than anything else, was that in the breasts of good men whether white or colored there burned a passionate love for democracy and justice. He had learned that among his own people and among members of the white race which had enslaved his people there were individuals who believed in the possibilities that the Negro race would eventually stand shoulder to shoulder with the white, each contributing of his ability to a common struggle for the freedom of the entire suffering human race. And he learned too that the constitution of the great land of which he was a citizen formulated, in no uncertain terms, the principle of free and equal status for every person in that land and set up a machinery of law to protect that freedom.

Aaron stood looking over the fields, his back turned to the house from which there came to him the continuous throbbing melodies of the songs which were

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greeting death. Now they were singing the Danville Chariot.

Swing low sweet chariot
Pray let me enter in.
I don' want to
Stay heah no longah.

He walked slowly away down the road, leaving the sounds which went with death behind him. Tomorrow he would help carry on his shoulder the rough pine box which enclosed his father's body, leading the slow wailing march to the group of willows where, with his own hands that day, Aaron had dug the grave in the spot where his father had asked him to. He walked more rapidly now, with each step leaving the singing farther behind until only the strongest notes reached him. But so strongly had it entered his heart and mind during the long hours through which it had gone on that he found his lips moving in keeping with the songs although no sound came from them and in his mind the words and music furnished an obbligato to his troubled thoughts.

Oh graveyard
Oh graveyard
I'm walkin' thru' de graveyard
Lay dis body down!

Through the haunting minor melody of the song surged a deep note of triumph, almost of joy, and he remembered another less known graveyard song, in which at the very moment of its most poignant expression of the realization of death surged a frank note of praise.

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Oh we take this po' body and we carry it to the graveyard
And we lay it in de grave.
Hallelujah!

He thought tenderly that there was cause for all who had loved his father to give praise for the release which had come to him. He had been a good man, a strong man, a wise man. He had taken life as it had come, without complaint and without making too great demands of anyone or of anything. He had been loyal to his friends and to all who had treated him fairly. He had cherished, for all his life, a great hope for the triumph of goodness and right, had lived cheerfully in squalor and looked forward to the day when his son Aaron, or Aaron's son, or that great host of on-coming young Afro-Americans would lead his people to a better day.

Aaron remembered how the last time he had been home he had talked with his father about the deplorable state of the share-cropper and, with the enthusiasm of youth, had proposed that he go and make serious complaints to the new white owner. But his father had only sighed and said:

"Aint no use complainin' boy. Might as well talk to a old rattle snake as talk to dat Mistuh Tyler. Caint do anythin' with a man like dat. Things was bettah when we had Mr. King an' dey'll be bettah again sometime."

"But there are laws," Aaron had said angrily. "You're being cheated."

His father had shook his head sadly. When he spoke there was a deep note of old wisdom in his voice.

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"Laws aint for colored," he said slowly. "Far as I can see aint much good for white men either. We used to get along all right without thinkin' bout law."

"But that was because Mr. Klingman obeyed the law," Aaron protested. "If the new owner won't the court will make him."

His father shook his head again slowly.

"Mistuh King was jes a good man," he went on, "an' dat settles hit. All de nigguhs liked him a heap too. Dere nevuh was a time on dis place when dey didn't hab all de hands dey wanted."

"Mebbe dat was because he made you de straw-boss," Hannah said, jestingly. "Since Mistuh King give up his place de nigguhs can't do lak dey ustah, 'cause dis Mistah Tyler dat took hit ovah ain't nuthin' but po' white trash, and Mistuh Tuhnuh done got as bad as he is."

Sam Turner had been the agent for the owners of Beaver Dam Plantation for many years. He was a thick-set, red-faced man, with a sardonic scowl playing about the corners of his mouth. He wore a six-shooter buckled around his waist, a habit he had acquired when he was a convict driver on the Parchman prison farm. The old negroes used to say: "He's hell-a-mile ef y'uh don' keep up wid yo' wuk, but he don' pay no tenshun tuh yuh and he don't try to drive yuh ef yuh make him a good crop."

For many years Sam Turner had lived alone in a white-painted house on the banks of the Beaver Dam. No white woman was ever known to enter the door of his strange living quarters. "Wanta be in the center

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of things" was the reason he gave for not living up at the plantation headquarters, where the farm manager and the bookkeepers and their families lived, but the old Negroes said he wanted to live where he could get drunk every night and sleep with a Negro gal. But neither whiskey nor women kept Sam Turner from rising early and riding the turn-rows.

During the cotton-picking season, he would ride up and down the field crying to the slow tenant farmers: "Hurry with that cotton, you Nigguhs; Winter's just over the hill. Them thar boles are busting open three times faster than you kin pick 'em. After while they'll be rolling on the ground. Get the wimmen folks and the chillun out heah, we need everybody to pull these cotton boles in the field."

The field hands would listen to his storming and work faster. None ever got up courage enough to talk back to him when he was in such an ugly mood. So long as he was round storming and cursing, the tenants bent forward and snatched at the cotton boles until their fingers bled, but as soon as he rode away and vanished over the hill, the tall cotton stalks no longer trembled from the touch of busy hands. Some of the tenants found the nearest tree and stretched out on the ground, their bronze legs and arms gleaming in the sun, while those that remained moved lazily through the field, bending their backs, snatching at the boles here and there and then straightening up to join in a song.

Aaron shook his head sadly as he walked along. What could he do for these people against the combination of

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a man like Turner, a man like Crawford and the whole tradition of black subjugation which had ruled the agricultural south since the day when the first slave-ship had landed on its shore to pour a host of strong muscled cringing black men and women from its stinking hold. He paused sharply as his feet encountered fresh dug earth. Without intent, without taking any conscious direction, he had walked to his father's newly made grave. With a sudden cry of anguish, he flung himself onto the ground burying his hands in the warm, loose earth, letting his forehead touch it, sobbing with deep wrenching sobs, releasing some of the emotion which his restraint since coming home had bottled up within him, facing bitterly the task which he knew in his heart he must undertake and which he knew equally well would be futile.

From far off came the moving sound of song.

I know moonlight
I know starlight
I'm walking through de starlight
Lay this body down!

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