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AUNT SARA'S WOODEN GOD

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AUNT SARA'S WOODEN GOD

BY

MERCEDES GILBERT

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FOREWORD

Miss Mercedes Gilbert, who comes from Florida to Broadway as one of America's leading Negro actresses, returns again to the deep south for the scene of her first novel, "Aunt Sara's Wooden God." This is an authentic every-day story of thousands of little families below the Mason-Dixon line, bound to the soil by poverty and blackness, but living their enclosed lives always in the hope that some-day some one of them may escape the family group and go on to higher things. Their tragedy is that there is so small a foundation on which to base such a hope. The wooden god of Miss Gilbert's novel is a mulatto country boy, worshipped by his mother, but himself unable to fulfill the faith and belief she has in him, balked as he is by poverty, the color-line, and his own inner weaknesses born of conceit and fear. That he lives and dies a hero to Aunt Sara, although he tortures and hurts so many others, constitutes the ironic tragedy of this book filled with little pictures of the rural and small-town life of the South.

Those readers who enjoyed "Jonah's Gourde Vine" or "Ollie Miss" will find in "Aunt Sara's Wooden God" a kindred volume.

Langston Hughes

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AUNT SARA'S WOODEN GOD

CHAPTER I

"Ah'm gonna lay down my burden
Down by de river side
Down by de river side
Down by de river side
"Ah'm gonna lay down my burden
Down by de river side
Ain't gonna study war no more."

Sara Lou's song trailed off to a whisper as William's voice, raised angrily, broke the silence of the early morning.

"You're a liar! and a meddlesome black fool! and I've got a good mind to smash your ugly face in," William shouted.

"Mister Gordon jes' tole me yuh done borried money from him an' said Ma sent you to get it, an' ah know he wouldn't lie on nobody," Jim retorted.

"Yes, you know it's the truth 'cause Mister Gordon said so, and he's a white man and can't lie," William sneered.

"No! It ain't dat, ah jes' knows yuh, an' what a liar yuh is!" Jim's remark raised William's fury to a murderous pitch. Picking up a long stick that lay near by, he raised it threateningly.

"Shut up, you black fool, before I knock your head off."

"You ain't gonna let your wooden God an'

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corn-stalk Jesus fool you into hittin' me," Jim taunted; his voice, though quieter than William's, carried a convincing quality of determination that William knew meant more than mere words.

Sara Lou ran as swiftly as her two hundred pounds would permit towards the barn from where the angry voices of her sons seemed to be coming. The early July morning had dawned hot and oppressive, and Byron, a small farming village in Central Georgia, stirred itself sleepily. Dew lay like carpet upon the green grass that covered the surrounding woods. Overhead numerous brightly colored birds flitted from tree to tree chirping loudly, unheard by Sara Lou as she called:

"Yuh Will-y-um! Yuh J-i-m! Will-y-um! Stop dat fussin' dis moment!"

William dropped the stick he held quickly, and turned to greet his mother, his face still flushed with a dull angry red that showed to the roots of his dark brown wavy hair.

"Yuh boys aught'er be shame uh yo'selfs, blood brothers an al'lers fussin' an' fightin', jes' cause yo' pa done died an ain't nobody but me to try an' keep yuh straight," Sara Lou scolded, as she stood between the two boys, looking directly at Jim.

Jim started to speak, but changed his mind and walked slowly away. What was the use, he thought. He could gain nothing by trying to tell his mother of William's latest deception. No matter what he said, his mother would take William's side. He was slow of speech, while William had answers ready before questions were asked, and their mother hung on every word he uttered. He was her God. Next to her religion, she worshipped him. To her

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his words were always soft and honey-coated, while to Jim, William used a patronizing tone which made the younger boy's blood boil. But their mother could not detect the underlying sneer in his smooth words and she usually blamed Jim for the frequent quarrels between the boys.

Sara Lou watched Jim as he walked away in the direction of the Gordon plantation. A little pucker in her usually smooth fair brow showed plainly the anxiety of her thoughts. In the depths of her large black eyes lurked the troubled expression which for the four years of her widowhood had dimmed the bright cheerfulness of former years, when her husband, John, had been the staid prop on which she leaned and watched her boys grow to young manhood.

A sigh escaped her lips, as Jim's figure receded in the distance. How like his father he was, she thought—the same slow steady tread, his father's height and color, the same quick flare of temper, and equally quick forgiveness.

Her mind drifted back over the years to the day, twenty years before, when she first met John Carter. He had come to Byron, to pick cotton, and had lingered on after the cotton picking season had passed. Owen Gordon, the richest white farmer in Byron, had hired him as a steady farm hand, but that had not been the main reason for his sojourn in Byron. He had seen Sara Lou, then a tall, fair young woman of twenty; her large black eyes had looked beyond him the evening he first saw her standing in her little cabin door on the outskirts of the Gordon place, but something sweet and soulful in their

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depths had made him want to talk to her and know her better.

He had asked about Sara Lou, that night, as he sat out in front of the little log cabin where he boarded with Lucy Salisbury, the village midwife and root doctor. (Aunt Salisbury, as she was lovingly called by the villagers,) gave her snuff brush, a tiny oak twig, a swish as she pushed it with her tongue from one side of her bony cheek to the other, and spat out a long string of brown snuff before she answered. Then, turning her feeble, squinty eyes heavenward, her jet black face seemed to take on a purplish hue as she exclaimed:

"Lawd uh mercy man, yuh ain't gone an' took no notice uh dat strumpet is yuh?" and without giving John time to answer she continued. "Dat gal jes' naturally ain't no good, cain't ever be no good, none uh her folks fore her was no good, dey was jes' a bad lot an' dat's all dere is to it."

"Whut yuh mean, a bad lot?" John questioned, mildly enjoying the distressed look on Aunt Salisbury's bony black face, almost invisible in the dim moonlight except for the white string with which her hair, short and thin, had been wrapped so tight, that her homely face looked strained and witchlike.

"Jes' dat, son, yuh see ah done knowed dem all, from her great grandma down to her, an' all uh dem 'cept Sara Lou's ma, done had half white bastard chillun."

"How did Sara Lou's Ma escape?" John asked laughing heartily.

"Well, to start wid, her great grandma, Hester, b'longed to de Saunders family back 'fore surrender. She was a pretty yeller gal jes' like Sara Lou

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is, an' de fust thing you knows she had a baby for old mister Frank Saunders, old missy Saunders gits suspicious 'bout it bein' his chile an' makes him sell Hester. Owen Gordon's father, Charles Gordon, bought her and put her to keepin' house for um. Well, Charles Gordon had a half brother who was jes' de limit when it comed to women, white or black. Wid him it didn't make no difference. It was jes' any woman who he could lay down wid, so he took right out after Hester's daughter, Ida, soon as she was knee high to a duck, an' when she was fourteen she had a baby for that man and they named her Charlotte. About a year after dat Ida's Ma Hester died, an' old man Charles Gordon went to live in Macon an' Ida stayed at de Gordon house to work for his son Owen Gordon, who had jes' got married. Well, Owen and his half uncle had a big fuss, an' the Uncle skinned out an' went some where up North, dat was de last heard uh him. Ida took charge uh de Gordon house and raised Charlotte right dare on de lot."

Aunt Salisbury interrupted her recital with a loud chuckle as reminiscences of Ida passed through her mind.

"Lawd, son, dat Ida was a caution. Twan't long 'fore she was sure runnin' dat Gordon home, an' when Owen Gordon's sons was born, first Lawrence an' den some years later Franklyn, Ida jes' took dem in charge and raised dem so dey wouldn't mind nobody on earth but her. She was a strong-willed woman as ever I seed, Ida was. Well, her gal Charlotte grew up right pretty an' 'bout de time she was seventeen, Owen Gordon had given us a little piece uh land an' de logs and some uh de men

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had built a church, our Calvary that we still worships in, an' de next year durin' cotton pickin' time a young preacher named Sam Smith come here to pick cotton an' decided he'd jes' stay on an' preach in de church an' farm. Well, den de fun started," Aunt Salisbury laughed, as she produced a box of railroad snuff from the pocket of her apron, and putting the stick she had been chewing into the box she moved it back and forth as she nodded her head on her bony neck with a gluttonous sound of suppressed mirth.

"Lawd, son, when Ida found out dat de new preacher, Sam Smith, had his eyes on Charlotte, she didn't let no grass grow under her feet. She started plotting right den how she was gonna marry Charlotte to dat black man so as to try an' live down dem half white bastards hur ma and hur done had, an' den she figured dat would be a good way to git back at us Byron colored folks dat had all'ers called dem de Gordon Niggers. Heh, heh, heh," she chuckled.

"Ida had dat preacher sneakin' up to de Gordon place every night to dere cabin back uh de Gordon kitchen, where she'd feed him chicken an' all de good things she could sneak out to him, an' den she ranged it for him and Charlotte to run off to Macon an' git hitched."

"What happened after they got married?" John asked as Aunt Salisbury paused in her story to rub her snuff brush over her few charred teeth and spit out her long brown string of snuff.

"Well, when the folks found out what had happened, dey got powerful mad and planned dat dey would stay away from de church, de next Sunday,

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but heh, heh, heh," the low chuckle shook Aunt Salisbury's shoulders, and when she got her breath she continued.

"Well, son, dat fust Sunday dey stayed away, but de next Sunday Ida had got a note from Owen Gordon sayin' dat effen dey didn't 'tend dey church meetin' he would take de church away from dem, and dat settled things, an' de darkies was glad enough to meet de new Misses Smith. Well, den Charlotte an' de preacher got long jes' fine. Folks was running over each other to meet dem an' make dem welcome. A year later Charlotte had a baby boy; a little ill-formed thing dat hopped 'round like a frog, an' 'twasn't long 'fore de pore little critter died, an' a year later, when Sara Lou was born, pore Charlotte died in child birth, an' de Reverend Smith raised her all by himself. Course, when Sara Lou was old 'nough she started working for Owen Gordon, and when she got to be twenty an' hadn't had no mishap ev'rybody believed she would marry respectable and like her Ma, but no, what did she up an' do but have a baby by Owen Gordon's son, Franklyn."

"Dat's 'bout all dere is to it, son"! Aunt Salisbury concluded, stretching her bony arms above her head and yawning sleepily.

"'Cept dat Sara Lou's trouble done killed her pore old Pa, he died foh her baby was two months old, it was bad enuff her havin' a bastard chile, but when as de pastor uh de church he had to turn her out de church, well, it was jes' more den de old man could stand so one night he jes' sleeped away." Aunt Salisbury ended her story with a sigh, as she rubbed

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her knees vigorously and hobbled towards the cabin door.

"Well, de gal is jes' human, an' ah sur' ain't blamin' her so much," John said as he knocked the ashes from his pipe and walked slowly towards the gate and called back "Ah'm sure gonna try an' git dat gal tuh marry me, eff'en she'll have me."

And John Carter kept his word. It was several weeks later when he got his first opportunity to talk with Sara Lou, he had walked around her cabin and found her sitting in the back door, her baby William held tightly in her arms, tears falling freely upon the face of the sleeping child.

It was a cool Autumn afternoon and when Sara Lou looked up to find him smiling at her, the serious expression in his eyes had brought a quick smile to her lips as she asked.

"Whut yuh want, Mister?"

"Nothing special, sister, ah was jes' passin' an' ah thought I'd jes' stop an' git acquainted," John answered, his smile broading to a grin.

"Well den, you better be on yo' way, cause dey ain't nothin' yuh nor nobody else kin do fuh me," Sara Lou answered, wearily passing her hand over her straight black hair that hung to her waist.

"Ah ain't so sure 'bout dat, dere's lots ah kin do. In de fust place, dis garden is all runned down, ah kin fix dat," John assured her, glancing over the little ragged garden that grew near the cabin.

Sara Lou had argued and tried to send him away, but he could not be gotten rid of, and thus their friendship had started, but to all of John's entreaties that she marry him, she turned a deaf ear.

"No, John, ah'se got my baby William, an yuh

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ain't gonna take him an' me an' ask no questions, an' ah ain't gonna answer none," she would always answer to his pleading.

"Listen heah, Sara Lou, ah swear ah won't never ask yuh nothing 'bout William an ah'll treat him lak my very own long as ah lives if yuh'll marry me," John promised from time to time. But it was a year later before Sara Lou consented to become his wife, after the news had reached Byron of Franklyn Gordon's death in an automobile accident in New York. Owen Gordon had spoken quietly that morning when she came to bring his laundry.

"I'm leaving this morning for New York, Sara Lou. Mister Franklyn has been killed in an accident," he said simply. And Sara Lou, not daring to answer, had nodded her head and abruptly left the house.

She had heard from time to time about Franklyn's escapades in New York. Owen Gordon had never mentioned him to her but news somehow travelled in the small village, and Franklyn's wild drinking and gambling had drifted back to Byron.

A week later, Sara Lou became the wife of John Carter; and until the day of his death he had kept his word, never to ask questions about William. He had treated the child as his own son, even spoiling him to some extent, for which Sara Lou rebuked him with:

"Now, John, yuh'se spoilin' dat boy, an' dat ain't right, 'cause he got hard 'nuff disposition now to fight down."

"Don't yuh worry 'bout William, Sara, he's uh

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smart chile, an' nuthin' ain't gonna spoil de young 'un", John would excuse.

A year after they were married, Jim was born, as black as his father, but a good-looking little chap. But even the birth of a son of his own did not change John towards William. Until the day of his death he had never shown any difference in his treatment of the boys, and William had loved and honored him with all his heart. If he had ever had any doubt that John Carter was his father, because of the neighbor's children's hints and jibes, he never showed it and for sixteen years life ran a smooth course for the Carters. John was a beloved Deacon in the little Calvary Baptist church, and Sara Lou's kindness to the villagers soon won their love and respect. Her ever-willingness to aid them in their trouble, answer the call of sickness and distress among them, had made her a favorite, and they lovingly called her "Aunt Sara."

She turned a deaf ear to the taunts the neighboring children threw at William, and when he came to her sobbing that they had called him a half white nigguh, consoled him with:

"Sticks an' stones kin break yo' bones but names ain't never goin' to hurt yuh, son."

Even as a small child he showed tendencies of a willful tempestuous nature, but she enthroned him in a place in her heart that no other human being could ever reach, excusing her partiality with the thought that he would need all the love and tender care she could give him to help him overcome his faults.

And thus life had run along, smoothly and happily for Sara until her husband's death. But, for

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the last few years the frequent quarrels between William and his brother had distressed her more than she cared to admit.

Jim loved William with all his heart, but he could not overlook the streak of deception that he saw, more plainly than anyone else, under William's smooth exterior. His fear for his mother's happiness was greater than anything else in his life. He knew that she worshipped William and did not want her to be disappointed in him.

On William's part, there was a deep dislike for Jim that had always been latent in him from early childhood. The realization irked him that Jim was legitimate and had a real father. He would be tortured with jealousy whenever John Carter cast a kindly glance at little Jim. And he would take any little remark directed at himself as bitter criticism. These flaring feelings had persisted with the years, but after John's death, he had stopped trying to conceal them, but allowed them to burst out in frequent quarrels and disagreements with his half brother.

Sara Lou had watched the growing dissension with fear and foreboding. Her eyes filled with tears, as she laid her hand tenderly upon William's shoulder, and asked:

"What's the matter, son? What makes you and Jim can't get along? Don't yuh love one another?"

"Oh, it ain't me, Ma. Jim is always fussin' 'bout me stayin' in Macon—going to High School," William answered, placing his arm affectionately around her waist.

"Thar yuh go—makin' love to yer ole mammy, as usual", she chuckled, her face showing the pleas-

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ure she always felt when near her handsome elder son.

William, a head taller than his mother, was straight and slender; his features, like hers, were finely molded; his hair dark brown and curly, matching well his smooth fair skin.

With a pleased little sigh she clung to him, loving the way he petted and fussed over her.

"Ah been wantin' yuh an' Jim to come an' git yo' breakfuss. It's nigh on to five uh clock an' yuh gotta git to Macon to yo' business," she said, pushing him before her towards the house.

"Ain't much doin' in my pressing shop right now, Ma. Folks wearin' overalls lots an' they don't need no pressin' shop for 'em," William remarked.

"What was that Jim was sayin' 'bout Mr. Gordon?" Sara Lou asked. A note of concern crept into her voice.

"Oh, nothin', Ma," William answered hastily. "Only he and Mr. Gordon both think I should be here workin' on the farm instead of tryin' to get a better education."

"That's all right, son. Some day me an' Jim goin' to be mighty proud of you when you'se carryin' the Gospel."

William was silent for a moment. Then, looking toward the Gordon plantation he observed: "Mr. Gordon's sure left lots of work for Jim while he's in Europe!"

"An' Jim'll git it all done. Dat sho' is a smart boy!"

"But he'll be gone a long time, Ma. There ain't no need 'er Jim tryin' ter do it all in a day when

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there's so much right here on our place that needs bein' done," William complained.

"Now Willyum, yuh jes' leave Jim do things his own way. Dass how come Mr. Gordon laks dat boy lak he does. White folks laks things don' right 'er way an' not put off ontell de las' minute."

"Well, can't we have our breakfast right 'er way, Ma?" William asked with a laugh.

"We sho' kin!" Sara Lou smiled and a few moments later they were seated at the table, before them a steaming breakfast of fat side, hot corn bread, molasses and coffee.

Sara Lou bowed her head as William prayed—a routine never neglected in their home.

"I'm goin' to ride to Macon this morning with Reverend Johnson. He's going in to see the doctor," William was saying.

"Ah'm glad he is caise he ain't been feelin' so well lately," his mother replied, full of concern about her ailing pastor.

"He's a good un for yùh to pattern atter, Willyum, when yuh starts preachin'," she added, looking at him proudly. Her desire to make a preacher of William was the greatest thing in her life, and although William wasn't so keen about becoming a preacher, he made her think he was, and after all it would afford him a chance to lead a life of ease and he hated work.

"He's all right, 'nough, ma, but he ain't educated and when I starts preaching, I'm goin' to be well prepared," he answered.

"But he's chuck full 'er religion, and dat's whut counts wid de Lawd, William."

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"And the Lawd ain't 'gainst us preparing ourself to carry His word either, Ma."

"Ah knows dat, William. Dat's why ah let yuh go to Macon to high school, but jes' de same, don't yuh git all puffed up wid pride caise pride goes 'fore a fall, de Lawd says."

William's face flushed over his mother's rebuke, as he lowered it over his plate, but when he raised his head again, he was smiling.

They had finished breakfast when Jim entered the kitchen. Placing a basket of fresh vegetables on the table, he seated himself to eat his belated breakfast. Sara Lou smiled fondly as, passing, she patted his shoulder, and hurried away to her many morning tasks.

Jim, a reticent boy of medium height, stocky and as his mother put it, 'the spittin' image of his father', claimed only one resemblance to his mother and brother—his eyes which were large and black. Unlike William who was a brilliant scholar, he had learned little in school; his brain just did not seem to grasp even the simplest rudiments.

The farm had been his teacher. He loved it, understood cattle, could doctor them when sick and bred them better than the oldest farmers around Byron. Since his father's death he had become the head of the house as far as earning the living was concerned.

Sara Lou's home like the other Negro cabins, had at first consisted of two rooms in which they lived, cooked their meals and slept. Her husband, John Carter, had however, enlarged it with two rooms built under the eaves known as a jump, adding a front and back porch downstairs and a little shed-

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