

NEW MASSES

Literary Section

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Bright and Morning Star

By Richard Wright

SHE stood with her black face some six inches from the moist windowpane and wondered when on earth would it ever stop raining. It might keep up like this all week, she thought. She heard rain droning upon the roof and high up in the wet sky her eyes followed the silent rush of a bright shaft of yellow that swung from the airplane beacon in far off Memphis. Momentarily she could see it cutting through the rainy dark; it would hover a second like a gleaming sword above her head, then vanish. She sighed, troubling, Johnny-Boys been trampin in this slop all day wid no decent shoes on his feet. . . . Through the window she could see the rich black earth sprawling outside in the night. There was more rain than the clay could soak up; pools stood everywhere. She yawned and mumbled: "Rains good n bad. It kin make seeds bus up thu the groun, er it kin bog things down lika watah-soaked coffin." Her hands were folded loosely over her stomach and the hot air of the kitchen traced a filmy veil of sweat on her forehead. From the cook stove came the soft singing of burning wood and now and then a throaty bubble rose from a pot of simmering greens.

"Shucks, Johnny-Boy coulda let somebody else do all tha runnin in the rain. Theres others bettah fixed fer it than he is. But, naw! Johnny-Boy ain the one t trust nobody t do nothin. Hes gotta do it *all* his-sef. . . ."

She glanced at a pile of damp clothes in a zinc tub. Waal, Ah bettah git to work. She turned, lifted a smoothing iron with a thick pad of cloth, touched a spit-wet finger to it with a quick, jerking motion: *smiitz!* Yeah; its hot! Stooping, she took a blue work-shirt from the tub and shook it out. With a deft twist of her shoulder she caught the iron in her right hand; the fingers of her left hand took a piece of wax from a tin box and a frying sizzle came as she smeared the bottom. She was thinking of nothing now; her hands followed a life-long ritual of toil. Spreading a sleeve, she ran the hot iron to and fro until the wet cloth became stiff. She was deep in the midst of her work when a song rose out of the far off days of her childhood and broke through half-parted lips:

Hes the Lily of the Valley, the
Bright n Mawnin Star
Hes the Fairest of Ten Thousand
t mah soul . . .

A gust of wind dashed rain against the window. Johnny-Boy oughta c mon home n eat his suppah. Aw Lawd! Itd be fine ef Sug could eat wid us tonight! Itd be like ol times! Mabbe aftah all it wont be long fo he'll be back. Tha lettah Ah got from im las week said *Don give up hope*. . . . Yeah; we gotta live in hope. Then both of her sons, Sug and Johnny-Boy, would be back with her.

With an involuntary nervous gesture, she stopped and stood still, listening. But the only sound was the

Federal Writers' Issue

GUEST EDITORS:

S. Funaroff and Willard Maas

WE ARE devoting this month's literary section to the work of writers on the Federal Arts Projects. The joint Federal Arts Bill (S. 3296 and H.R. 9102) proposes to establish a permanent Bureau of Fine Arts, which would support and make possible the functioning of writers and artists throughout the United States. The distinguished contributions made by the Federal Theater, Music, Art, and Dance projects are already well known to the public. The creative writing presented here indicates the high degree of literary talent on the Federal Writers' Project and emphasizes the need for government support of the arts.—The Editors.

lulling fall of rain. Shucks, ain no usa me ackin this way, she thought. Ever time they gits ready to hol them meetings Ah gits jumpity. Ah been a lil scared ever since Sug went t jail. She heard the clock ticking and looked. Johnny-Boys a *hour* late! He sho mus be havin a time doin all tha trampin, trampin thu the mud. . . . But her fear was a quiet one; it was more like an intense brooding than a fear; it was a sort of hugging of hated facts so closely that she could feel their grain, like letting cold water run over her hand from a faucet on a winter morning.

She ironed again, faster now, as if the more she engaged her body in work the less she would think. But how could she forget Johnny-Boy out there on those wet fields rounding up white and black Communists for a meeting tomorrow? And that was just what Sug had been doing when the sheriff had caught him, beat him, and tried to make him tell who and where his comrades were. Po Sug! They sho musta beat tha boy something awful! But, thank Gawd, he didnt talk! He ain no weaklin' Sug ain! Hes been lion-hearted all his life long.

That had happened a year ago. And now each time those meetings came around the old terror surged back. While shoving the iron a cluster of toiling days returned; days of washing and ironing to feed Johnny-Boy and Sug so they could do party work; days of carrying a hundred pounds of white folks' clothes upon her head across fields sometimes wet and sometimes dry. But in those days a hundred pounds was nothing to carry carefully balanced upon her head while stepping by instinct over the corn and cotton rows. The only time it had seemed heavy was when she had heard of Sug's arrest. She had been coming home one morning with a bundle upon her head, her hands swinging idly by her sides, walking slowly with her eyes in front of her, when Bob, Johnny-Boy's pal, had called from across the fields and had come and told her that the sheriff had got Sug. That morning the bundle had become heavier than she could ever remember.

And with each passing week now, though she spoke of it to no one, things were becoming heavier. The tubs of water and the smoothing iron and the bundle of clothes were becoming harder to lift, her with her back aching so, and her work was taking longer, all because Sug was gone and she didn't know just when Johnny-Boy would be taken too. To ease the ache of anxiety that was swelling her heart, she hummed, then sang softly:

He walks wid me, He talks wid me
He tells me Ahm His own. . . .

Guiltily, she stopped and smiled. Looks like Ah jus cant seem t fergit them ol songs, no mattah how hard Ah tries. . . . She had learned them when she was a little girl living and working on a farm. Every Monday morning from the corn and cotton fields the slow strains had floated from her mother's lips, lonely and haunting; and later, as the years had filled with gall, she had learned their deep meaning. Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like

Him and suffer without a mumbling word. She had poured the yearning of her life into the songs, feeling buoyed with a faith beyond this world. The figure of the Man nailed in agony to the Cross, His burial in a cold grave, His transfigured Resurrection, His being breath and clay, God and Man—all had focused her feelings upon an imagery which had swept her life into a wondrous vision.

But as she had grown older, a cold white mountain, the white folks and their laws, had swum into her vision and shattered her songs and their spell of peace. To her that white mountain was temptation, something to lure her from her Lord, a part of the world God had made in order that she might endure it and come through all the stronger, just as Christ had risen with greater glory from the tomb. The days crowded with trouble had enhanced her faith and she had grown to love hardship with a bitter pride; she had obeyed the laws of the white folks with a soft smile of secret knowing.

After her mother had been snatched up to heaven in a chariot of fire, the years had brought her a rough workingman and two black babies, Sug and Johnny-Boy, all three of whom she had wrapped in the charm and magic of her vision. Then she was tested by no less than God; her man died, a trial which she bore with the strength shed by the grace of her vision; finally even the memory of her man faded into the vision itself, leaving her with two black boys growing tall, slowly into manhood.

Then one day grief had come to her heart when Johnny-Boy and Sug had walked forth demanding their lives. She had sought to fill their eyes with her vision, but they would have none of it. And she had wept when they began to boast of the strength shed by a new and terrible vision.

But she had loved them, even as she loved them now; bleeding, her heart had followed them. She could have done no less, being an old woman in a strange world. And day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision; and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace. The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her strength went.

"Lawd, Johnny-Boy," she would sometimes say, "Ah jus wan them white folks t try t make me tell *who* is in the party n who *ain!* Ah jus wan em t try, n Ahll show em something they never thought a black woman could have!"

But sometimes like tonight, while lost in the forgetfulness of work, the past and the present would become mixed in her; while toiling under a strange star for a new freedom the old songs would slip from her lips with their beguiling sweetness.

The iron was getting cold. She put more wood into the fire, stood again at the window and watched the yellow blade of light cut through the wet darkness. Johnny-Boy ain here yit. . . . Then, before she was aware of it,

she was still, listening for sounds. Under the drone of rain she heard the slosh of feet in mud. Tha ain Johnny-Boy. She knew his long, heavy footsteps in a million. She heard feet come on the porch. Some woman. . . . She heard bare knuckles knock three times, then once. Thas some of them comrades! She unbarred the door, cracked it a few inches, and flinched from the cold rush of damp wind.

"Whos tha?"

"Its me!"

"Who?"

"Me, Reva!"

She flung the door open.

"Lawd, chile, c mon in!"

She stepped to one side and a thin, blond-haired white girl ran through the door; as she slid the bolt she heard the girl gasping and shaking her wet clothes. Somethings wrong! Reva wouldna walked a mile t mah house in all this slop fer nothin! Tha gals stuck onto Johnny-Boy; Ah wondah ef anything happened t im?

"Git on inter the kitchen, Reva, where its warm."

"Lawd, Ah sho is wet!"

"How yuh reckon yuhd be, in all tha rain?"

"Johnny-Boy ain here *yit*?" asked Reva.

"Naw! N ain no usa yuh worryin bout im. Jus yuh git them shoes off! Yuh wanna ketch yo deatha col?" She stood looking absently. Yeah; its something bout the party er Johnny-Boy thas gone wrong. Lawd, Ah wondah ef her pa knows how she feels bout Johnny-Boy? "Honey, yuh hadnt oughta come out in sloppy weather like this."

"Ah had t come, An Sue."

She led Reva to the kitchen.

"Git them shoes off n git close t the stove so yuhll git dry!"

"An Sue, Ah got something t tell yuh . . ."

The words made her hold her breath. Ah bet its something bout Johnny-Boy!

"Whut, honey?"

"The sheriff wuz by our house tonight. He come t see pa."

"Yeah?"

"He done got word from somewheres bout tha meetin tomorrow."

"Is it Johnny-Boy, Reva?"

"Aw, naw, An Sue! Ah ain hearda word bout im. Ain yuh seen im tonight?"

"He ain come home t eat yit."

"Where kin he be?"

"Lawd knows, chile."

"Somebodys gotta tell them comrades tha meetings off," said Reva. "The sheriffs got men watchin our house. Ah had t slip out t git here widout em followin me."

"Reva?"

"Hunh?"

"Ahma ol woman n Ah wans yuh t tell me the truth."

"Whut, An Sue?"

"Yuh ain tryin t fool me, is yuh?"

"Fool yuh?"

"Bout Johnny-Boy?"

"Lawd, naw, An Sue!"

"Ef theres anything wrong jus tell me, chile. Ah kin stan it."

She stood by the ironing board, her hands as usual folded loosely over her stomach, watching Reva pull off her water-clogged shoes. She was feeling that Johnny-Boy was already lost to her; she was feeling the pain that would come when she knew it for certain; and she was feeling that she would have to be brave and bear it. She was like a person caught in a swift current of water and knew where the water was sweeping her and did not want to go on but had to go on to the end.

"It ain nothin bout Johnny-Boy, An Sue," said Reva. "But we gotta do something er we'll all git inter trouble."

"How the sheriff know bout tha meetin?"

"Thas whut pa wans t know."

"Somebody done turned Judas."

"Sho looks like it."

"Ah bet it wuz some of them new ones," she said.

"Its hard t tell," said Reva.

"Lissen, Reva, yuh oughta stay here n git dry, but yuh bettah git back n tell yo pa Johnny-Boy ain here n Ah don know when hes gonna show up. *Somebodys* gotta tell them comrades t stay erway from yo pa's house."

She stood with her back to the window, looking at Reva's wide, blue eyes. Po critter! Gotta go back thu all tha slop! Though she felt sorry for Reva, not once did she think that it would not have to be done. Being a woman, Reva was not suspect; she would have to go. It was just as natural for Reva to go back through the cold rain as it was for her to iron night and day, or for Sug to be in jail. Right now, Johnny-Boy was out there on those dark fields trying to get home. Lawd, don let em git im tonight! In spite of herself her feelings became torn. She loved her son and, loving him, she loved what he was trying to do. Johnny-Boy was happiest when he was working for the party, and her love for him was for his happiness. She frowned, trying hard to fit something together in her feelings: for her to try to stop Johnny-Boy was to admit that all the toil of years meant nothing; and to let him go meant that sometime or other he would be caught, like Sug. In facing it this way she felt a little stunned, as though she had come suddenly upon a blank wall in the dark. But outside in the rain were people, white and black, whom she had known all her life. Those people depended upon Johnny-Boy, loved him and looked to him as a man and leader. Yeah; hes gotta keep on; he cant stop now. . . . She looked at Reva; she was crying and pulling her shoes back on with reluctant fingers.

"Whut yuh carryin on tha way fer, chile?"

"Yuh done los Sug, now yuh sendin Johnny-Boy . . ."

"Ah got t, honey."

She was glad she could say that. Reva believed in black folks and not for anything in the world would she falter before her. In Reva's trust and acceptance of her she had found her first feelings of humanity; Reva's love was her refuge from shame and degradation. If in the early days of her life the white mountain had driven her back from the earth, then in her last days Reva's love was drawing her toward it, like the beacon that

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The Brown Coat

By Alexander Godin

THE first time we tried to cross the border into Poland, we were arrested on the Russian side. This was in 1921, at the close of the summer.

One of our wagoners had betrayed us; and afterwards we were led back on foot, Siberian style, through the parched Ukranian steppe. The blazing sun scorched our backs during the day, we staggered from thirst, and knelt on all fours to drink from those stinking pools of water which the sun had not yet dried up.

At night, we slept in makeshift jails, upon pale-yellow straw stamped into shreds from much use; this straw swarmed with vermin like a clear pond with fish. The sentry who accompanied us slept in a sitting posture in the doorway; his eyes were open like a dead man's, and his trigger-finger rested on his battered rifle.

Sometimes a passing wagon picked us up; wagons were scarce, however. They had been requisitioned so often by the armies which had contended for the Ukraine, the peasants had finally driven their horses into the woods. But a week later we were back in Zhitomir, from which we had set out on our desperate and foolhardy journey to America.

After that, we stayed in the local Cheka. When given food, we ate, and listened to the dull clicking of the typewriters overhead. All around us we heard the stubborn cries of a dying world. The life around us burned itself out quickly, hemmed in by death as by a raging sea. It was into this life from which, panic-stricken, we had fled, that we were again thrust, my older sister and I.

WHEN MOTHER was transferred to a women's prison outside the city, we were put in the custody of a relative.

There was not enough food in the house of our relative, however. They were starving in that house also, and while my sister remained, I wandered homelessly over Zhitomir. I went in search of shelter and food, trying to outstrip that death which was surely overtaking all the living; I returned to the Ribnaya market, which swarmed with other homeless boys.

In the middle of the square the Ribnaya porters stood on the cobbles with bare feet, rope coiled about their waists like the snakes of Indian fakirs. Their shoulders were wide and bent like shovels. They had nothing to do here now; but they had stood on this spot for years, and continued to stand in the stifling heat. They smoked fruit-leaves rolled in thick wrapping-paper, and the homeless boys imitated them.

Afterwards my eyes were fixed on the ground in a desperate search for applecores; all the homeless and hungry of the city walked with intent faces and bent heads. When I found a core, I would swallow it at once, fearing to be deprived of my find by those who were stronger than I.

For, instead of being made more savage by hunger, I grew weaker from day to day. The world was too much for me and my twelve years, and I felt my life burning itself out hopelessly; I felt the wretchedness of our lives and my own boyish terror rise up in my throat, my head would grow large and empty with despair, and I would sink into a coma.

I began to fear the long, stifling days, through which walked ghosts; and to dread the nights, when I would lie down in some abandoned house beside other homeless ones. The threads of my days seemed endless; but these threads were in danger of breaking at any time, and I was more afraid of dying than of anything. For I had seen my brother die, I had witnessed the struggle he had put up before the rigidity of death had finally conquered him, and I did not want to die.

SOMETIMES I WOULD FLEE these thoughts, however, and run off to the prison where mother was kept; but whenever I reached its gates, I was refused admittance.

Afterwards, when I succeeded in entering the prison-yard, the sentry began to drive me back. I had crawled under the creaking body of a commissary-wagon on its way in; inside, standing at a barred window, was mother.

She prevailed upon the sentry to leave me a while; and sobbing wordlessly, all the bitter days welled up in me, and I wanted to complain, to keep on complaining. The nature of the place, however, the ghastly walls of the prison, and the eyes of the other women upon me, forced me to silence.

When mother handed me a bit of her prison-bread, a mixture of chaff and chopped straw, I became oblivious of everything else; leaving her at the window, I ran, eating the bread and starting at every sound.

This life could not go on indefinitely, however; I needed something to shield me from the world, or I would perish like so many others. This should be of such a nature, at least, as to make the utter senselessness of my existence bearable. Then a new coat arrived for me from America, some clothing for the others, and a little food.

The market-square on that day, for some reason almost deserted, became filled with porters and homeless boys when the huge crates, loaded on flat wagons, arrived from the station. They surrounded the wagons quickly, talking with unusual animation; I pushed myself forward with difficulty.

The wooden crates were bound with flat strips of metal; outlandish characters were stenciled in black on their sides, and from the damaged corners of one crate, as it was being unloaded, dribbles of rice poured out. The porters fought the homeless boys for this rice, they