

Mrs. E. L. Williamson,
Pine Apple,
Alabama.

Approximately 1500 words.

EMANCIPATION

by

Keane Williamson

LEANING forward along the length of her aproned lap, her shriveled fingers clasped lightly in front of her boney knees, the little old negress rocked quietly, gently, in uninterrupted rhythm. Her eyelids were lowered; but from the wrinkled, shadowed slits, she watched intently: now, the gleam of the firelight on the pistols in the hands of the two white men just inside the door; now, the long still length of crocus sacks hung over the crack on the far side of the chimney corner.

"Nawsuh, he ain' hyah." She spoke calmly, regretfully.

"I ain' seed Dave since dis mawnin'."

"You're lyin'." The words bit out like a snake-whip into the shadows of the fire-lit cabin.

Aun' Cindy shook her turbanned head doggedly. "Nawsuh, Mist' Red, I wouldn' tell yer no lie--"

"Naw--you wouldn't. No faster 'n you could think 'em up."

"Whut I'm tellin' yer, hit's de God's truf." Her thin voice rose and fell in persuasive measure, soothingly, reasonably. "Dave's my gran'chile, but ef Dave wuz in de wrong lak y'all sez, an' he'd er bin hyah, I'd er sho' tol' y'all--"

"The devil you would!" The tall man broke in again impatiently. "What kind of a fool do you take me for? Where's that nigger?"

"'Fo' God, I ain't seed 'im--"

The dirty, rat-faced fellow rose out of the shadows. "A chunk of that there fire'd get the truth outer the old bitch, Boss," he suggested hopefully.

The rheumy old eyes lifted swiftly to Red Biron's set face, then as swiftly fell as she caught his quick gesture of negation.

"I'm runnin' this, Harvey, and I ain't that particular about knowin'." He jammed his pistol into the holster and took a step forward. "What I am particular about is gettin' a piece of news to yo' Dave, and that damn quick."

The old woman paused in her rocking and looked up at him, questioningly.

"An' Cindy, that nigger's been here, sho' as Christ, this night--"

"'Fo' God, Mist' Red--"

"Shut up, you lyin' old she-devil. You ain't foolin' me: Dave's been here, and you know damn well where he's gone. Y'can get him this news--it may suit him better'n a bullet in his guts-- You tell him I say Lissa McIntosh is my woman, and the day he

lays his hands on her, he'll start rottin' in hell."

"Law, Mist' Red, Dave ain' never had no truck wid dat black gal--"

"Shut up, I tell you. I'm doin' the talkin'. Tell him, Mr. Harvey, here, was watchin' him tonight when he crawled up to Lissa's window--"

"Nigger's jus' curious 'bout w'ite fo'kes--"

"Yeah?" Red Biron's eyes narrowed suddenly. "Tell yo' Dave, Mr. Harvey was lookin' square at him when he took them two pot shots at me through Lissa's window."

Harvey spat toward the fire.

"I tried to blow his damn brains out--"

The old woman shivered once as she watched the tobacco spittle gather in a tiny trail of shining globules across the scoured planks, but she made no answer. An oak log settled, and broke with a shower of gleaming sparks.

After a moment Biron turned abruptly and walked over to the door; with his hand on the door-chain, he spoke again--"Tell Dave," he said softly--soft as steel--"tell him I say to get out of Scott County and stay out, if he don't want the buzzards to pick his meat off a rope. Think you can get him that word?"

"Yassuh." Old Cindy got up stiffly. "He gwi' leave hyah. I'll git 'im de wo'd."

"All the niggers yet livin' in Scott County know I don' 'low nobody, black or white, meddlin' in my business. Time Dave was learnin'."

"Yassuh. Dat's right. You's right." Humped and wizened,

she steadied herself, by the sway-backed rocker, waiting for white-folks to take their leave.

"Well--let's get going, Harvey." Biron loosed the clanking length of chain.

A gust of raw March wind blew the door back against the thin wall with a clatter; it whirled the ashes from the low wood fire out across the rough stone hearth; it fanned the fire into a furious blaze--and it lifted for a moment the edge of the crocus sack curtain along the far side of the chimney corner. Just the edge.

Harvey caught the quick turn of Aun' Cindy's head, the sudden stillness of the bent figure. He whirled on his heel, his pistol glinting in the leaping flame.

"Boss--look--"

Red Biron wheeled in the doorway. "What the hell--?"

"That damn nigger's behind them sacks--"

"What?"

"I seen her when the wind got under 'em--"

"Nawsuh, Mist' Red." The old woman spoke fast, desperately fast, and her fingernails showed white against the rocker back.

"Dat ain' nothin' but whar' de house done settled off from de chimbney. Us jes' hung dem crocus sacks over de hole to keep out de win'. Dat's all dat is--"

"Yeah?" Biron caught the door and closed it behind him.

"Take a look, Harvey."

Harvey eased cat-like across the floor. With a sharp, ripping sound he jerked the rude curtain from the supporting nails.

A slender yellow negro stood clutching the sides of the opening, his sweat-beaded face drawn and pinched. He made a queer, whimpering sound. Biron's hand went to his pistol. Stumbling, half-falling, the old negress was between them, her thin wailing voice rising and falling eerily in the awful stillness.

"Mist' Red, don' kill 'im! Please, suh, don' kill my baby! He's all I got--please, suh, don' kill 'im--"

Biron laughed derisively. "'Fo' God, you didn't know where he was!"

"Mist' Red, don' shoot 'im! He ain' nuthin' but a boy--"

"He's man enough to want my woman." Slowly he drew the pistol from its holster.

Dave stood still and unmoving, paralyzed by naked fear. Biron's bitter face darkened in scorn. "Scared, ain't you? Well, you got scared a damn sight too late."

"He'll git out, Mist' Red! 'Fo' God, I'll git 'im off! He ain' never goin' set foot in dis county--"

Biron's nose showed white at the base as he took his aim. "Get back, Harvey," he said between clenched teeth.

Old Cindy clutched with claw-like fingers at his tensing hand, and falling to the floor, drew it down with her frail body.

"God damn you!" Furiously Biron wrenched his hand from her puny grasp.

"Dave's de onliest gran'baby I got-- He ain' mean no harm--"

"Naw--he just tried to shoot my heart out."

"Let him have it, Boss?" Harvey's finger whitened on the

trigger.

"Oh, Jesus!"

"Get back, I tell you, Harvey!" Biron rasped out, struggling to free himself from the black leech. "God damn it--he's mine!" He shook loose from the frantic old fingers, and took swift aim. Dave's breath came in gasps. From the floor, the old negress' voice rose to a shrill scream.

"Wait, Mist' Red! Yassuh, he's yourn! He's yourn! Dat's yo' boy!"

Red Biron's finger stopped its pressure. "Like hell he's mine!" His voice came roughly--but he waited.

"Yassuh, Mist' Red! Dat's Eva's boy. Yer 'member yer uster go wid my Eva? Didn' you, now?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Still, he waited.

"Dat's y'all's baby--yo's an' Eva's--"

"I didn't get no baby by that slut."

"Yassuh, yassuh, yer did, beggin' yer pahdun. Yo' pa sent yer down to New Awleans dat Spring he foun' out 'bout you 'n' Eva, but Eva wuz in er fix den wid Dave. Eva died a-birthin' 'im. He's yourn."

"I went with her gal, Eva, all right. She was in the business--"

"In the business is right! Ain't no tellin' who daddied that bastard--"

"Yassuh, dey is--Mist' Red, 'members he stopped 'er from goin' wid udder mens--"

Biron's voice was bitter. "I've fooled with nigger women

long enough to know you don't stop none of 'em--Eva, Lissa, none of 'em--no longer 'n you got your eyes on 'em."

"Dave's sho' yourn." The old woman was pleading now.

"Tell her to prove it, Boss."

"Ain' y'all see he ain' black?"

"That won't do. Eva wasn't black herself. He ain't mine."

"Dave's yourn--"

Red laughed grimly. "If he's mine, you oughter raised him not to shoot at his daddy."

With a terrible deliberation he lifted the pistol--old Cindy dropped forward on her face with a shuddering murmur.

"Lawd, Jesus--he's yourn--"

Dave's eyes widened until a ring of white showed around the black balls. A quick surge of blood darkened his ashen face.

"By God--I ain't none er yourn," he said hoarsely.

"My Jesus--" the old woman was sobbing.

Biron's pistol wavered, dropped an inch.

"What the hell did you say?" he asked slowly, puzzled.

The stiff grey lips moved before there was sound. Then, "I ain't none er yourn. I'se a black man. Y'all can shoot me--I ain't nobody--but by God, you ain't shootin' no white man's chile!"

Harvey's face flushed angrily. "You damn impudent nigger! Gimme leave, Boss--I'll cut your black guts out." His greedy eyes glistened in the firelight.

The blood drained away from the negro's face as swiftly as it had come, leaving it ghastly in the firelight. His glance darted wildly toward the back door, seeking desperately for escape.

Red Biron's eyes had dropped to the pistol in his hand. He stared at it for a long moment. Then, his hand relaxed. With a gesture of finality he replaced the gun in its holster. He motioned to Harvey.

"Put up that pistol," he said shortly.

Harvey stared incredulously. "You ain't goin' to let this biggity black son of a bitch get away with that--" he choked in baffled fury.

Red Biron's eyes were hard. He jerked his head toward the door. "Get out of here, Harvey." But Harvey stood unmoving, shocked, unbelieving. Biron turned--"You too, you damn nigger." Like a taut spring released, the negro disappeared into the black night.

The old negress lay prone upon the floor. "Thank yer, Jesus! My Jesus!" Her sobbing voice rose and fell in rhythmic cadence.

"Boss--" Harvey was whining--"he ain't yourn. You let 'em take you in like that--"

"You're a damn fool, Harvey," Biron turned on him savagely. "You know a nigger's blood's water when he looks down a pistol hole. That nigger's got a white man's blood-- Get the hell outer here."

A gust of wind swirled the ashes over the darkening room, and flapped the loose newspaper sharply on the wall by the far chimney corner. Presently the old black woman crawled slowly over to the banging door, and peering for a moment out into the night, noiselessly fastened the ancient chain.

- THE END -