Another version of "Jim Lauderdale: River Wreck," entitled "A Dead Convict Don't Cost Nothing," can be found on pages 401-420.

AL-41

Jim Lauderdale,
Talladega Springs, Ala.
1 mile west.

Jack Kytle,
Editorial Department.

Where'd I come from?

JIM LAUDERDALE: RIVER WRECK

He was sitting on the slanting front porch in a splash of sunlight when I came upon him. His eyesight is not so good anymore, and he did not see me until I had reached the steps. Then he raised his thin, sun-baked face from his hands and smiled a little.

"How are you feeling, Jim?" I asked. And he said, "Son, I'm a-dyin' by the graduals. I won't be aroun' much longer, don't guess. They say my heart's a-cuttin' up somethin' turrible, an' I got a gnawin' in my belly."

Let him talk about them

If one can draw Jim Lauderdale's mind from a hundred old hates, and if one has a dime to spare for a cupful of cloudy corn whisky, one may hear his story. He is a baldish, owl-eyed little man with an annoying habit of holding his hand to his mouth when he talks, as if he were forever gossiping. His shoes are held together by twine, his trousers are ragged and unkempt, and it is more than probable that he has not bothered to bathe in years. In his own words, he has "settled down t' wait fer th' ol' man" (death) and he does not hope to better his present condition.

He has stayed by himself so long that a host of imaginary enemies have emerged from his liquor-twisted brain. He hates these enemies with amazing passion, and it is best to keep his mind off them. Among his special hates are a preacher, who he says is "th' devil wearin'

a frocktail coat," and "that ragged policeman" at Talladega Springs who once put him in jail six times in a single week.

I asked him, "Where is Ora?"

His face clouded. "Oh, that miserable thing (she is his wife) is over at Sylacaugy a-workin' in th' mill. She's been gone nigh 'bout a year now, an' hit's done me good. You know how we'uns jes fit an' fit, an' how I wa s allus in jail. Well, sir, one mornin' I tol' her to git her duds an' clear out. She tuk th' two children, an' she hain't been back since."

"What about the children?," I asked.

"Well, th' boy, Dorsett, he's a-goin' t' school, an' I hyar that he's right smart. Th' little ol' girl, Zelma, hain't doin' good a bit. She's like her dad, I guess; she can't learn nothin' in books."

He rose from the chair with an effort, and placed his hand against the wall as if to steady his feeble legs. "I'm havin' t' hit it purty hard these days," he explained, "Can yuh stan' a shot of shinny?"

We walked into a bare, unkempt room, and he drew a quart bottle from the drawer of a battered washstand. One look convinced me that I did not wish to join him. The liquid in the bottle looked like water that has been mixed with ammonia. Its evil odor filled the room.

More specific

He held the bottle to his mouth several moments, taking several good-sized drinks, and then he placed it back in the washstand. He said, "I was sorter s'prised t' see you. Folks about hyar don't have much t' do with me no more. I

'ppreciate yore comin'."

He paused to look at the floor a moment, as if in deep thought.

"Yuh know," he said, "Miss Hazel come home awhile back, an' I jest bumped square into her. An' do yuh know whut she done? Why, she says, 'Jim, I'm glad to see you,' an' then she shook hands with me. I 'ppreciate that, too." (Miss Hazel is a New York school teacher who visits her parents in Talladega Springs each summer).

When his several "slugs of shinny" had brightened his faded eyes, I asked, "You have lived along this river all of your life, haven't you?"

"Off an' on, I have," he said. "Of course, I ben out, an' that's better than a lot of these people do. I worked in th' mines at Birmingham 'til I was too sick t' work, an' then I come back an' fooled about with whiskey a good time. Ora 'ported me, though, an' they sont me down t' Kilby fer a stretch. (He always speaks of Kilby Prison as some university from which he was graduated with honors).

"Are you doing any fishing now?"

"I hain't fished since my heart's ben bad," he said, with the characteristic lifting of one hand to his mouth. "I hain't fox-hunted nome neither. I jes set hyar doin' nuthin' much. Hit don't cost me nothin' t' live, fer I don't eat much no more. I got a little money thet I saved onct, when I was foolin' with whiskey, an' hit gits me by. I jes' hope I die 'fore hit gives out, an' I guess I will."

"Don't you get lonely living alone like this?," I asked,

"Wouldn't you like to get away from this place?"

He smiled crookedly. "I ain't never ben happier in my life," he said. "I'm a-gittin' along, an' that's as much as th' folks who live aroun' hyar are doin'. No, sir, I hain't a-honin' t' do nothin' else. I got Ora gone now, an' she bothered me fer years. She is the low-downdest, meanest woman I ever seen."

"Why didn't you get a divorce a long time ago?"

"I hain't got no truck with courts; they done enough to me already."

He was sitting there on the porch when I left him, his chair tilted back against the weathered wall. And turning back to wave goodbye to him, I thought, "Jim, I'll never see you again; the old man is almost here."

His fading eyes did not see my gesture. He rose from the chair again and disappeared into the darkened room where the washstand stood.

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