

There are three versions of the following interview which are substantially different in content and/or format. Therefore all versions have been included in the project. The third version, entitled "Hester Fry," can be found on pages 825-831.

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R. P. T. [Ruby Pickens Tartt]

NO LAWD, I AIN'T READY

The old house was set back from the dirt road. Where the lawn had been, only dog fennel was growing. The low picket fence was almost down. A back chimney had fallen, and part of the roof was open to the sky. There were no steps at the front. A tangle of wistaria gripped the rotting gallery. No one answered my "hello." I pulled myself up by one of the rickety pillars and picked my way over sagging boards to the door. I knocked but no one answered. Wandering around the gallery to the back, I met an old Negro man who invited me to walk in and "res" my hat.

Through a side door I entered a room with drawn and torn shades. As my eyes became accustomed to the dimness, they picked out an old rosewood piano. On its top were several daguerrotypes, a family album, and copies of old songs with mildewed pages. On the wall above were two hollow-cut silhouettes, one a man and the other a pretty woman. On the mantel was a small figurine, perhaps of Derby Bisque, whose companion no doubt had shared the fate of other treasures. To the right stood an old wing chair, its needlepoint cushion soiled and frayed. There was an old blue perfume bottle holding a bunch of faded artificial flowers. On a small marble-topped table nearby was an etched hurricane glass of great beauty.

In turning, I faced, though it was partly hidden now by the open door, a tall bookcase filled with books. Crossing the room, I read several titles on the shelf level with my eyes. There was Darwin's

Origin of Species, The Descent of Man and various works of philosophy. Suddenly I heard the sound of shuffling feet and a voice broke into the silence.

"You better git outa here, 'cause Mr. Charlie ain't go' lack nobody rummagin' 'roun' 'mongst his things." Turning around I saw standing across the room an aged Negro woman, barefooted, and dressed in a loose, soiled blue homespun dress and faded blue head handkerchief.

"I'm looking for Hester Frye," I answered.

"This here is Hessie."

"I heard you lived on the old Johnson place and thought this was the house, until I saw these books. Now I wonder if I might buy some of them."

"Hit too late now," she said, "but I wish to de Lawd you had er got 'em a long time ago, fer they ain't never done Mr. Charlie no good, nor nobody else, ef you ax me." She walked slowly into the room, through the door I had entered, and out the back. "De front door done been boaded up," she added, "caze don't nobody never come here no mo'," putting into that cryptic sentence all that one somehow felt.

I followed her down the back steps and across the narrow plank walk to a small cabin which I had somehow not seen on the far side of the house. "If this is your house," I said, "won't you let me come in and talk with you awhile, and tell me something of your family, and what you do and where you came from?" Her dialect I had noticed, was different from that of the usual Alabama Black Belt Negro.

With an apparent distrust, not only of me, but of life in general, she sat down on the steps, and in that same haunting voice said, "Tain't no use to come in caze I ain't got nothin' ter tell, 'cause I don't know

nothin'. My name is Hester; jes' lack I said, Hessie Frye is what I goes by. I ain't never been married ter nobody, that is I ain't had whut you might call no reg'lar husband. En all I does is jes' stay here and look after Mr. Charlie. I ain't never been no fiel' hand. Jes' stays in de house. I ain't got no folks, deys all gone too long ago. My mammy's name was Lucy Frye. She came out here in slav'y time wid Marse Bob, frum Char'ston, South Ca'lina in a wagin. Didn't none uv her folks come wid her, jes' her by herself, en she say she didn't never see none uv 'em no mo'. Den I wuz born here, right here in dis yard, and didn't never know no pappy, but I wuz here 'fore Marse Bob died, en 'fore his two boys, Mr. Joe and Mr. Johnny died too, en once dey's gone ain't no comin' back. I can't recollect Miss Ca'line much, caze my 'membrance is shaller, but she wuz us old Mistess. I knows she had er heap er troubles; I hear Mammy say dat. I usedto wash and iron de shirts en look atter de house in dem days, jes' lack Marse Bob lef' hit, dat's jes' lack he found hit. But ain't nothin' lef' now to look atter. Ev'ything done drunk up an' in ruination. Mr. Charlie mos' done come to de end uv de row, en my tiredness done come down on me too. I don't 'zactly know how ole I is, but I knows I is gettin' on, but you better go 'long now, Miss," she said, "caze I'se got plenty ter do 'fore dark en hits mighty nigh fust dust now.

I apologized for having taken up so much of her time, and then remembered to say that I had been invited into the "gre't house," as she called it, by an old Negro man. "Must er been 'Bokay,'" she said, "but he don't b'long here no more en you does, he jes' roams about

caze he ain't got no place ter stay at, en he's sorter franzy-minded too. He can't do nothin' much 'cept chop a little wood now en den."

A straight mulatto girl came up the path carrying a battered oil can and a small bundle of broom straw. "Here's the kerosene, ma," she said to Hester. "Mr. Charlie say fill up de lamp 'fore he get here, but he say he specks ter be late caze he gwine to de chicken fight over in Green."

Encouraged by this I decided to find out more if possible about this pathetic old Negro. "Doan take dat green broom straw in de house, Rose," said Hester. "De fros' ain't fell on hit yet en I'se done had 'nough bad luck 'thout that. Us can make de broom outside, I reckon. Don't reckon Mr. Charlie give you no money did he, Rose?" asked Hester. The girl untied the corner of a large smudged handkerchief and displayed a twenty-five cent piece. "This all he gimme for de church supper." I recalled the Negro church that I had passed in the woods near the big road.

So I asked if she were a member of Good Hope Church, and if she was going to the supper with Rose. If she had heard some bad news she could not have looked more bleak. She sat motionless for a few seconds, then slowly raised her head, and looking not at me but far beyond said:

"No'm I ain't goin' to no church wid nobody. I ain't j'ined no church, caze I ain't never had no b'lief an' no 'sperience, and you can't jine 'thout you is got 'ligion. Hit's too late now I reckon. I used ter want ter jine, but Mr. Charlie say 'ligion wuz jes' a pack er foolishness, en dat all dat shoutin' en whoopin' en hollerin' whut folks did, wa'n't nothin' but foolishness neither." She paused a moment,

then added "En I thought he knowed. No'm I didn't never jine en hits too late now I reckon. I b'lieves Heaven's a good place to go though, but I can't tell you how come, caze I doan know nothin' 'bout hit. I ain't never 'fessed no hope in Christ, ain't never sung none uv dem old songs lack I hear 'em sing.

'De folks keep a-crowdin' on de gospel ship

There's no use a-waitin' fer de 'scursion trip.'

"En I know dere ain't, dere sho' ain't, but I feels de need ter be baptized caze hit soon be time fer me ter ride on de Jordan tide en I ain't ready, no Lawd I ain't ready! I been settin' here thinkin' 'bout dat en I b'lieves my time is mos' out. I sneezed las' night wid my mouth full of vittles en dat's a sho' sign er death, hit doan never fail hardly, en whut is I gonner do? I hear folks say Christians kin view God-er-mighty, en git happy if dey jus' 'fesses Christ. Some folks tells me dey kin hear little moans en kin walk 'cross hell on a spider web, but I ain't never seen hit done. 'Fore Mammy lef' she tole all us chillun on de plantation ter live fer Christ, caze she said hit wuz de onliest way, but I didn't pay her no mind.

"You see, Miss, Marse Bob didn't 'low none uv his colored folks to go ter no church in dem days, er to no meetin', en didn't 'low 'em to have no books er no schoolin' caze they say he wuz feared uv a uprisin' mongst 'em. Dem wuz sad times, en Marse Bob said 'ligion wuz a lot er trash jes' lack Mr. Charlie do now, en both them got book larnin', Mr. Charlie en dem is, an' Mr. Charlie he know dem books by heart. I ain't never been ter no school. I doan know whut de Bible say 'bout hit, caze I can't read no printin'. I used to try to pray

sometimes when I get lonesome lack, en I'd shut de door en put my head down in de wash pot so hit could kech de soun', den pray easy lack so Mr. Charlie wouldn't hear me an' fuss. I reckon ef I could er prayed out loud I could er got 'ligion but hit's too late now; hit look lack I jes' can't hardly b'lieve somehow." She dropped her hands between her knees and said no more.