

Two other versions of "Hester Fry," entitled
"No Laud, I Ain't Ready," can be found on
pages 657-669.

HESTER FRYE

The old house was set back from the dirt road. Where the lawn had been only dog fennel was growing. The 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 planks to the door. I knocked, but no one answered. Wandering around the gallery toward 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 used to the dimness they picked out an old piano stool covered with worn red plush and moth-eaten ball fringe. Scattered on top of a once lovely but now outmoded square piano, were several daguerreotypes, a family album, and mildewed copies of old songs.

On the wall above were two charming hollow-cut silhouettes, one an aristocratically high-nosed gentleman, the other a young and engagingly pretty woman. On the mantel was a small figure which may have been Derby Bisque, and whose mate no doubt had shared the fate of other treasures, the spoils of many generations. The needle-point of the cushion of an old wing chair, was soiled and frayed, though the chair was deep and hospitable. There was an old blue perfume bottle holding a bunch of faded artificial flowers, and on a small

marble-topped table was a lovely etched hurricane glass of rare pattern. A queer, heterogeneous₂ collection₂ it was, and I turned to leave, for I still had not found the woman whom I had come to see. As I moved, a tall bookcase partly hidden now by the open door, ~~high with books~~ came into view. I stood still, torn between desire to investigate what appeared to be a rare literary find, and to forget the mustiness of the past that surrounded me when the titles of several books challenged my attention. These were Darwin's Origin of the Species, the Descent of Man, and several ~~other~~ books of philosophy. Hardly a second passed, before the sound of shuffling feet through what sounded like an empty room, was followed by a voice which can only be described as flat and utterly lifeless saying, "You better git out er here 'cause Mr. Charlie ain't gonna lack nobody rummagin' 'roun' 'mongst his things." This was so totally unexpected that for a moment I was frightened, and turning quickly I saw across the room, ^{her} bare arms hanging limp at her sides, a barefoot Negro woman,

^{was} She was ~~glad~~ in loose, soiled, blue homespun, and ~~with~~ ^{was} a faded spotted handkerchief ^{around} ~~swathing~~ her head. ^{was} Her face ~~so~~ curiously gray, and her eyes so dull that she appeared encased in a fog. Silence followed, broken only by a tree-branch which scraped the window to and fro.

^{was} The amazing thing/~~that~~, though my imaginary fears had so completely upset me, the sight of a soul so withered and desolate should somehow restore my confidence.

I tried as best I could to explain why I was there. "I came here looking for Hester Frye, I said. "This here is Hessie," she replied. "I was told," I continued, "that you lived on the old Johnson place

and somehow I imagined this was the house, that is, until I saw the books; then I became so interested I hoped I might buy some from whoever might own them."

"Hit too late now," she said, "but I wish to de Lawd you had er got 'em er 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 and through the door where I had entered, and out the back. "De front door done been boad'ed up," she added, "caze don't nobody never come here no mo'." ~~putting into that cryptic sentence all that I had somehow felt.~~ For here was a once proud place now tuned in a ~~minor key to a jumble of shattering discords.~~

I followed her down the back steps and across a 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 yourself, and your family, and what you do and where you came from?" (Her ~~dialect I had noticed, was different from that of the Alabama Black Belt, Negro's).~~

With an apparent distrust, not only of me, but of life in general, she sat down on the steps, and in ^{her} ~~that same~~ haunting voice said, "T'ain'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 ^{what} ~~what~~ you might call no reg'lar husban'. 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} wuz Lucy Frye. She came out here in slav'y time, wid Marse Bob, frum Char'ston, South Ca'lina, in er wagin. Didn't none ^{of} ~~w~~ her folks come wid her, jes' her by herself, en she say she didn't never see none ^{of} ~~w~~ em no mo'. Den I wuz born here, right here in dis here yard, and didn't never know no pappy, but I ^{was} ~~w~~uz 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 ^{was} ~~w~~uz us old Mistess. I knows she had a heap er trouble; I hear mammy say dat. I used to wash en iron de shirts en look atter de house in dem days, en jes' lack Marse Bob lef' hit, dats jes' lack he found hit. But ain't nothin' lef' now to look atter. Ev'rything done drunk up an' in ruination. Mr. Charlie mos' done come to de end ^{of} ~~w~~ 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 er little wood now en den."

I understood now something of her dialect. She was a Gullah Negro, at least her mother was, and it was the influence of Scotch

and English still surviving in her speech, with what I believe was a slight alcoholic overtone. But why, I kept wondering, should these simple words of every day speech convey such hopelessness and despair?

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 besmudged handkerchief and displayed a twenty-five cent piece. "This all he gimme fer de church supper." I recalled the Negro church that I had passed in the woods near the big road. I had also noticed the barbecue pits and a number of Negroes busy nailing up long rough tables. In fact I had been directed to the Johnson place from there. Here at last was the open door. Hester would talk of religion, I felt sure, any Negro will, the thing buried deep in their beings.

And 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 the door of destiny slam shut in her face at that moment 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. Hits too late now I reckon. I used ter want ter jine, but Mr. Charlie say 'ligion wuz jes' er pack er foolishness, en dat all dat shoutin' en whoopin' en hollerin' ^awhat folks did, want nothin' but foolishness neither." She paused a moment, then added. "En I thought he know'd. No'm, I didn't never jine en hits too late now I reckon, I b'lieves Heaven's a good place to go to 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 ² 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

No Lord, I Ain't Ready (Negro) Ala. Very Good

Unusual story, old Negro - living in midst of decayed grandeur - discouraged by employer's form religion she has attitude of bleak hopelessness.

Features - A Negro without religion