BIG BLACK: A MISSISSIPPI I-THLL

by

Thomas Lenier Williams

Mahan Contest
1931-1932
Honorable Mention
Number 5.
BIG BLACK

A gang of negroes were laying a road south of Jackson, Mississippi. They were breaking rocks. Their picks clanged heavily, monotonously. A hot wind, sweeping at intervals like the spasmodic breath of some monster with a belly of fire, crouching upon the other side of the level cotton fields, brought swirls of yellow dust from the parched ground and groans and curses from the lips of the rock-breakers.

It was late afternoon. The white boss, a giant of an Irishman, wet and fiery red as if he had just been dipped into a tub of blood, had a brown jug of corn "likker" under a clump of weeds somewhere up the road. He had trudged up to it every hour or so during the long day, and now he had begun to stagger a bit; his cursing voice had gotten thick. He was after the men like a mad devil. They gave him no back talk. They kept their eyes away from him. They all knew that he had once burst a negro's head open for calling him a name, and that he had gotten away with it.

Rhythmically, heavily they heaved themselves up and down, nothing behind their picks, now, but the weight of their exhausted bodies. Song that usually sticks in the negro throat as long, almost, as breath, had grown weak and sporadic. And for long periods there was nothing to be heard along the blistering road but the scuffling and thick cursing of the white boss, the murmur of the yellow-hot wind in the cotton, the clanging of the picks upon the rocks, as heavy and as monotonous as Time.
Then a thing happened which has happened often before, but which has, nevertheless, an effect that was always startling. One of the men flung his pick violently upon the top of a pile of rocks. He tore his blue shirt open to the waist, laying bare the gleaming black arch of his chest. He flung his muscular arms high above his up-thrust head and uttered a savage, booming cry.

"YOW-OW. YOW-OW-W-W."

There was a break in the clanging of the picks, even in the staggere, cursing and parasing of the white boss. This was a cry that could have been duplicated by no other throat. It was a huge, towering cry, beginning upon a deep growling note and veering flame-like into a ululating peak, high enough and sharp enough, it seemed, to split open the sky. A human cry? It seemed, rather, the voice of the flat and blistering land. It was elemental, epical, like a challenge and like a prayer flung at Life.

The clanging of the picks began again. The white boss continued his stagger, cursing and parasing. But that cry has penetrated and quickened the minds of the rock-breakers; it has shaken them from their torpor.

"Ole Big Black--there he goes again!" they have said. They have looked at each other and grinned. The aching of their backs and arms, the soreness of their feet, were less acute. Their miseries seemed to have found expression in Big Black's vast utterance and to be accordingly relieved. In a few moments they have caught up a song.
Big Black was six feet and five inches tall. He was pro-
agiously, repulsively ugly. His great, round face was like
that of the "nigger" in the revolving circle of wooden sum-
mies at which base-balls are cast for Kewpie doll prizes at carni-
vales and amusement parks. His shoulders and his arms were gar-
gantuan. He had, probably, more lifting, and pounding, and
dragging power than any two men in the gang. He exulted in the
use of that power. When he hoisted to his shoulder some great
weight which the strongest of his fellow-workman couldn't barely
have raised from the ground, his eyes gleamed triumphantly, like
those of a wrestler who has thrown an opponent. He worked fever-
ishly. Work was Big Black's meat, said the men in the gang. And
it was a good analogy, for Big Black gorged work as though he
were famished for it—as though he could never get enough of
it. When he had finished breaking his own pile of rocks, he
would shove a neighboring workman roughly aside, and start in
upon his. That was why the white boss, who never cared to
curse the gigantic negro, tolerated him in the gang.

And yet Big Black was not a popular character among the
men of the gang. He was too strange, savage, inarticulate. He
never joined in the songs or bantering conversation. He never
shot craps, told vastly rabelaisian jokes, went into town on
Saturdays to drink "likker" and visit a woman. He never chased
after the cotton-picking girls or told talltales when he was off
the road, or lay with his belly in the hot-soot dust and laughed
with The Love of Life Returning After Toil. He was a black
beast that had taken grotesque human form and had no voice but
that terrible ululating cry...
It was quitting time now. "Quittin' Time!" the drunk Irishman bawled. He was lurching wildly; he would sprawl into the shadowy, weedy ditch, now that it was quitting time, and there he would sleep for several hours, grunting, still muttering curses, his blue shirt clinging black with sweat to his rea barrel chest, flies settling upon his bare throat, wet and bright rea as blood, upon his arms, rea hams covered with a fuzz of white-bleached hair.

When night came, showing that the coolness of a moon and stars could still exist above the sun-tortured earth, he would slowly rouse himself; he would vomit; after a while he would drag himself out of the stinking, weedy ditch, go lurching down the road, beginning to sing. He would retrieve the half-empty jug from the clump of weeds, see that it was securely corked, and then he would go on staggering, and singing louder and more cheerfully, till he came to his Ford, parked beside a fallen tree; cranking and cursing; then a wild spluttering; and then back to town, singing, veering crazily upon the bumpy road, shooting up clouds of dust in the white-moonlight, thinking blithely of the things that waited for him at home—a big Irish supper on a checkered table cloth, a big Irish woman on a brass bed.

It was quitting time. The negroes trudged over the flat dusty fields, toward the row of cabins which housed them. They trudged wearily, yet their voices were loud and mirthful. The Love of Life Returning after Toil was in them. The scent of supp

pers seeped over the fields, cotton-picking girls stood in the
soorways, their hands on their hips, their white teeth flashing. Snatches of song and laughter, as free as birds, danced into the air. There was the rattling churn of a pump, the joyous bark of hounds to returning masters, the mooing of a cow, the frantic clucking of a hen seeking to evade its executioner, the blaze of the sky dying out, the white moon turning yellow. Banjos twanged mellowly—tomorrow was Sunday—Life was forgiven its trespasses—hugged close hot black bodies. Life—having its way.

Big Black ain't go with them. There was no one waiting for him in the cabins. And it would be hotter in them than it was upon the road. There would be the stench of sweating bodies, sizzle of frying foods; too many people, too many voices, and none of them for him. He preferred to be by himself. A huge, black figure, a black beast ingrotesque human form, he trudged down the road. Where was he going? He ain't know. He kept on down the road; he passed the white boss's Ford beside the fallentree; he passed a rusted tin sign picturing a bottle of medicine, a cat killed by soggs lying in the ditch, an automobile tire worn smooth and white with frayed edges. He came at length to the wooden bridge that crossed the small river. Up a ways he saw a patch of woody land upon the shore of the river. The sun hasn't fallen or lost its heat. His body was tired after its orgy of labor on the road. It would feel good lying in the shade—maybe he would bathe himself in the river. It was over half a mile to the clump of trees. But when he got there, the shade was good. He dropped to the ground among some bushes. He groaned, stretched
himself, closes his burning eyes. He was too tired to bathe in the river—too tired.

His mind was about to sink into sleep when, not far distant, there came the sound of splashing in the river. He re-opened his eyes. He raised himself slightly, and peered between the bushes in the direction of the splashing. Through the tangles of leaves and branches he caught a glimpse of white arms flashing above the brown surface of the water. He lifted himself quickly upon his hands and knees, quickly but silently. Like a great black animal, he crouched behind the bushes, peered at the naked girl bathing up there. The river was thickly interwoven with light and shade from the slowly sinking sun. He could see her for a moment; and then she was gone; and then she appeared again. He could see now an arm, now a shoulder, now her face; once she dove into the shallow water and the fleeting glimpse of her white body surging sinuously above the dark brown stream, catching the sunlight like wet ivory, made him quiver. The mind behind those glistening animal eyes worked slowly, precisely. She was by herself. She was very young—not more than a child. She must have come from the poor white folk's camp on the other side of the river.

The feverish ache left Big Black's body. He felt cool and tense with excitement. He crawled, noiseless as a snake, through the tall grass, behind the thick screen of bushes, till he had come to a point alongside the bathing girl. Watching her from his bushy covert, his breath came so thick and so low that he feared she might hear it. She was now standing near the opposite bank,
only knee-deep in the stream. Her body was just rippling into womanhood; it was delicately beautiful. The low sun, shining through her hair wet by the stream, touched it with prismatic color. Her skin was gleaming white like the inner surface of a wet shell. Big Black revolved her with his eyes, clenched his fists, stiffened in every muscle, felt sick with desire of her.

"She will cross the river," he said to himself, "and then I will gether."

For several minutes she stood in the same position in the unshaded patch of water, as though she were drinking into her body the sizzling warmth of the sun. Then she waded deeper into the river and started swimming slowly, gracefully toward the bank upon which Big Black was crouching.

He waited until she was within a foot of the shore; then he plunged through the bushes,rove over the low bank into the water. With his huge hands he throttled her first cry. For a few moments the feel of her wet, struggling body in his arms intoxicated him. He swayed back and forth, clasping her, and uttered low, guttural sounds like a hungry animal tearing at a fresh kill. Then of a sudden the ecstasy fell away from him. Horror replaced it. His eyes fastened upon his black hands clasping the white, terrified face of the girl. Its great spatulate fingers spread wise, gripping the white face, it looked like a hideous, huge black spider. It was ugly—ugly. The ugliness of it sickened him. Still clasping her writing body, but now standing quite still, all of the desire gone out of him, he stared with fierce loathing at that black hand of his, and he muttered bitterly to himself,
"You big black devil! You big--black--devil!"

He raises the screaming girl high over his head, flung her into the middle of the stream. Then he scrambled madly up the bank and through the bushes. As he ran along, panting, stumbling, for all the world like some great hunted beast, he wondered vaguely what he should do. He couldn’t return to the cabins. That evening, as soon as the girl has reported his assault, they would be scouring the country for him. He turned back to the river, swam over the low bank--there was a current in the middle--it bore him away--away.

A gang of negroes were laying a road south of Savannah, Georgia. Their picks clanged upon the rocks, as heavy and monotonous as Time. The wind blew yellow swirls of dust, the men groaned and cursed. Among them was a black monster of a negro. He was prodigiously big, prodigiously ugly. He worked with a fury, as though he could never get enough of it. They called him Big Black, the strongest, ugliest "nigger" that ever worked for a white man.

Big Black paused for a moment in his orgy of labor to spit upon the pile of rocks. He watched the brown stream of tobacco juice trickling over their white surface, the flies settling avidly upon it. It was ugly, ugly. And as he watched it, a picture flashed sickeningly into his mind of a black hand, like a huge and hissing spider, gripping the white face of a girl! Ugliness seizing upon Beauty--Beauty that never could be seized!...

Big Black tore his blue shirt open to the waist, arched his huge black chest, flung his sweating arms above his head, and
uttered a savage, booming cry.

"Yow-OW!  YOW-OW-W-W!"

It began upon a deep growling note, veered flame-like into a ululating peak, high enough, and sharp enough, it seemed, to split open the sky. It was elemental, epical. It was like a prayer and like a challenge flung at Life.

There was a break in the clanging of the picks; wet ebon faces grinned at one another.

"There goes ole Big Black agin!"

In a few moments they had caught up a song.