

THE FIELDS ARE HIGH - 009

EVERY MORNING Esther took the two pints of milk in the blue jelly jar up to the Whites.

This was a concession; for Belle, Esther's mother, brooked no nonsense of sending milk to her customers. "Leh who wan' milk come fo' all gone," she used to tell them when they came late and complained because she had no more to sell. But then, Mrs. White, Mrs. White was a lady, and Mr. White was foreman at the newspaper office in the city, and Hedio, their little brown-skinned girl, used to cycle by fast to school, holding the skirt of her smart blue uniform down on her legs with one hand, her two black plaits bowed with red ribbon long down in her back. Yes, Mrs. White was a lady, and Belle didn't mind sending milk to a lady who never went to town without her gloves and veil. And on the first of every month, too, Esther would bring back the money for the last month's milk wrapped in a piece of paper, tightly clenched in the palm of her small hand.

Esther only carried the morning milk; in the evening the girl who did for the Whites came for it.

Esther loved to set out early on mornings, before the last stars had gone, and take the high road that led over Craig's Hill to Duke's Village where the Whites lived. For then she could mount the two foot wall that bordered the left side of the road where the land fell away, and walking along, could watch the sun rise way away cross the fields and feel its warm touch on her cheek, until Dr. Fullerton's high wall rose in her face and she had to jump back on to the road.

But that morning Belle had forbidden her to go that way. “Don’t you go nuh Craig’s Hill way fo’ me,” she had told her as she was about to set out. “The canes high, an’ they got wosless, lawless people ‘bout. D’you hear ?”

That meant she would have to take the other way, along up Government’s Road, through Bethel’s Tenantry and drop into Duke’s Village from the back. Esther didn’t like that way much. That way seemed so lonely and strange, with only the big, sleeping houses and that high wall that hid the sun long after it had risen. Besides, there was a huge dog that always hurled itself against a gate and roared its awful, blood-thirsty roar from out its bowels at her as she passed. It couldn’t get over, but it frightened her all the same.

She walked along slowly, her rounded little arms thrown up, holding the jar of milk on her head, and turned right up the grey asphalt main road. About twenty yards up she stopped, undecided, where the road went off into a Y.

At last she turned left, taking the road that she wanted. There would be something to pay if her mother knew, but she’d never know. As she walked on she let go the jar on her head, counting the number of steps she could take before she had to clutch it again. She wondered why Belle and Aunt Oph, tall women that looked awfully big to a little girl, should so fear anyone, even a man in the canes. Esther thought she would like to see him, anyway. She wouldn’t never be afraid. She’d talk to him, and ask him why he made Belle and Aunt Oph and the people

from the village so scared to walk Craig's Hill road when the canes were high. And she'd ask him, too, if the men who went through cutting the canes in the crop never found him, and where he used to live when the fields were low, and what he used to eat. She'd make friends with him, and then she'd tell Ma and Aunt Oph that they never had to be afraid to walk Craig's Hill any more.

She reached where the wall started, and clutching the jar of milk to her in the crook of her hand, mounted and walked along the narrow ledge. After a while she stopped, and turning, fronted the wide, crimson dawn, and the low, misty country that rolled before her in all its golden-touched, variant greenery. There she stood, her slender little self erect, her dark, sun-splashed face wide-eyed and eager, the lips folded in tight. Then she thought she would see how the sun looked on the tall canes behind her, and snapped her head round over her shoulder quickly.

For one second she caught glimpse of the face peering at her from between the tall canes on the fringe of the field. A face bony and gaunt, with lots of hair about it, the hooded eyes red and unblinking as an animal's, the strong, yellow teeth showing through a wry, friendly smile. Esther turned quickly, but before she could jump on to the road the face had gone, and she heard a rustling as the man's body moved back into the canes. She crossed the road and stood for a long time in

the damp, dewy strip of grass that ran between the fields and the highway, poking her head this way and that, peering between the tall, crooked stems. At last, disconsolate, she came off the grass back on to the road and continued on her way slowly, her head screwed round to the right, searching the high fields as she passed.

A week passed; days in which she never once mounted the wall. She hardly ever thought of the sun's coming now, but walked slowly along on the right side of the road, conscious, expectant of every rustle in the yellowing canes, her eyes alert and scanning, searching the canes on her right. She wondered why Belle and Aunt Oph never, never came Craig's Hill way now, and why they warned her so often and so strictly not to take that way. They must never have seen the man in the canes, she thought, how old and weak and broken he was, or they wouldn't never be afraid. Always, as she walked along of a morning, she could feel his eyes upon her, but she could never, never see him, peer into the canes as she might. She wondered what was his name, and if he were as old as Mr. John, the old beggar who sat on the steps of Montrose's shop with his stick and bag and mouthed and slept and drivelled.

One morning she fell on a plan to catch him. She would walk along the wall until she reached the spot where she had stood the morning she had looked around and seen him. She would stand there long, making pretence she was watching the sun, until she felt his eyes watching her. Then, looking around quickly she would catch him.

She mounted the wall, and reaching the spot turned and faced the east just as she had planned, the blue jar of milk held down in her two hands behind her. Twice she glanced around quickly, but each time she saw nothing, only the jointed, crooked stalks and the yellowing, arrowed heads of the canes golden with the first flush of sun. For the third time she turned her back upon them, her heart heavy within her.

She didn't hear his approach. Just felt his touch on the back of her knee. Turning, she looked down into the gnarled, hair-frosted face and on the hunched-up figure. She recognised the coarse, dirty shirt and pants he wore, for she had often seen the prisoners drawing the cart loaded with tools and supplies along the street.

For a moment the dirty, unshaven old face beamed friendly; then turning the man looked furtively up and down the road and scuttled back into hiding like a timid, frightened animal scurrying for cover.

In the cover of the canes he turned, facing the girl who had followed close on his heels.

"Ssh," he said in a hoarse, urgent whisper, "go on your way child, go on your way. You ain't got no right here, you ain't got no right talking to nobody like me."

Esther looked him over before her. He wasn't so old as she had imagined after all. But his shoulders were stooped, his long arms hanging low like an ape's almost to his knees.

“You’re the man the police been looking for,” she told him.

“Leh them look, missie,” whispered the man, “leh them look. They’ll look up hill an’ down dale, but they won’t never find me till I’s e reedy. Not ‘fore I’s e ready to go back an die.”

“Ma an’ Aunt Oph nor nobody else never walk Craig’s Hill now,” said the girl; “they’re fraid o’ you. But I ain’t fraid. You can’t never do nobody nothing. You’re too old an’ weak. But you ain’t as old as Mr. John the beggar what sits on Montrose shop step. How old are you?”

“Honest to God, missie,” swore the convict, “I’s e forgotten. But I were twenty-six when they took me, an’ I’s e apent a life-time there. But God mek peace, missie, God mek peace you s’ much like me own little Effie, you s’ much like me own little Effie that I just had was to touch you to make certain that it weren’t me own little Effie what come back.”

“I ain’t like no Effie,” Esther pouted; “why’d they take you?”

He didn’t seem so anxious for her to go now. Once or twice he reached out his long arm and stroked the little girl’s black, coarse hair. Esther never wore a hat on mornings. She just used to jump out of bed when Belle called, throw some water over her face, and slipping on a dress, take the jar of milk and go on up to the Whites.

The man seemed to have heard some sound, for he listened intently, then turned and plunged deeper into the canes, Esther following.

“What for’d they take you?” she had to repeat when at last he turned and faced her again.

He didn't answer at once. Then after a time he said: "You won't know 'bout Federation missie, but it were a time when the Police an' the people an' the sojahs an' ever'body walk 'bout thievin' an' shootin' an' killin' as they likes. Well the Missus, my Missus, Effie Ma, she used to work in the city with some whites, an' that night I went was to bring her home same's I always used to, an' I take little Effie with me, for there weren't nobody who could stay in the house with she an' the people was doin' as they likes. Well we went an' collect the Missus, an' comin' back up through Bon' Streed, me an' Effie an' Ma, the place was all in darkness, an' what should happen but a sojah in a store door shout to us to stop. Well Ma an' Effie ain't know no better but start runnin', an' that sojah to frighten them mo' start to fire he gun. I hear some thing smack 'gainst something on the store over we heads, an' then I hear Effie scream an' fall down in the middle o' the road. When I stoop down an' pick she up I Josh Donald did done know that no mo' Effie was goin' come runnin' down the hot tar road to meet me when I came home in the evening from work no mo'. I look up an' see the sojah who'd come over when he see little Effie fall, an' missie, little missie I went mad. I leave lone Effie, an' snatchin' the gun what he had in his han' I smash his head same's I'd smash an egg with a brick. An' that's why they took me, missie, that's why they took me.'

Esther looked long into the gaunt, grey-haired face, and knew how her heart beat fast for the lonely, hunted man. Without a word she gripped the jar of milk tightly to her, and unscrewing the cover, offered him the jar.

He seemed reluctant to take it, then taking it, tipped it to his head and took a gulp or two before handing it back.

“Yes, an’ that’s why they took me missie,” he repeated, wiping his mouth with his hand, “must be nigh forty years ago. So when they bring me out fo’ a stretchfoot with the roadsters the other day I waits till the warders wasn’t lookin’ an’ the res’ was weedin’ an’ slip way in the canes, fo’ they ain’t so watchful o’ me, me being so ol’. But that were a good ways way, missie. They won’t look fo’ me here, ‘cause they won’t never believe I come so far. Missie, I did want to walk round an’ breathe God good clean free air fo’ the las’ time afore I goes back. An’ missie they won’t never find me. They’ll search up hill an’ down dale missie, but they won’t never find me ‘fore I ready to give myself up an’ goes back there to die. You ain’t never goin’ tell nobody where you see me little miss, nuh?”

“Honest to God I won’t,” promised Esther, kissing her hand back and front.

“Look! it’s broad daylight child,” he said urgently, “get on your way with your milk. What’ll your elders say?”

“You’ll sic me to-morrow morning when I pass’” she asked earnestly.

“Sure, I’ll sic you missie, if they don’t come this way,” he promised.

She turned, and running through the canes, came out upon the road. Lightheartedly she tripped along, up to the Whites. When Mrs. White enquired why she was so late she just laughed and laughed and kept her eyes down.

That was Monday . Every morning for the rest of that week he'd be waiting for her at the same place on the fringe of the fields. Sometimes he'd give her cane screwed and split into little pieces which she sucked while he told her about Effie. One morning he showed her where he slept. A small clearing way back in the canes, where the stalks had been broken and trampled low, thatched over by interwoven heads.

And then on Sunday as she came up Craig's Hill the air was sweet with the smell of newly cut canes, and before her she saw the brown trash and stripped earth where the reapers had started on the field. When she reached the spot where he usually waited for her she saw no friendly, ugly old face grinning through the canes at her coming. She called his name, low, "Donald, Donald, Mr. Donald," but he didn't answer. She knew then that he had gone.