

Lilah Walker

Interview with Lilah Walker

—*William B. Strickland, Carbon Hill*

I HEAR DE WHIRRIN' OF QUARE WINGS

I walked through a small glade overshadowed by large oak trees, near Carbon Hill in Walker County, Alabama. A weird little cabin confronted me; its porch and steps loosely held to the main part of the structure by a few weak boards. Lilah Walker, an old Negro woman, squatted on the steps with her chin resting in her black hands, in an attitude of deep reverie. As the old woman heard me approaching she raised her head in cordial greeting.

"Come in, young marster," she said. "How is you today?"

"Fine, Aunt Lilah," I answered. 'How's the world treating you?"

"Oh, I can't complain," she replied.

The old woman continued.

"It mought be safer to set inside, 'case dey says when de sun swing low lak dis dat de miassahs whut make you sick 'gin to rise outten yon' swamp." Then she chuckled: "I bin here since 'fo' de wah, an' I ain't neber seen no miassahs rise outten dat swamp yit. Yassuh, dat sho is so, but from whut I seed rise outten it my 'pinion is dat dey done lef' long 'fo' dis. But I seed quare wings whirrin' outten dat swamp jus' 'fo' days atter de surrender, an' I seed 'em near 'bout eve'y day since. I seed 'em an' I heered 'em jus' a whirrin'!"

"Nawsuh, I sho can't 'splain de wings, but I is got my 'pinion how come dey is. When I tells you whut took place here durin' dem dark ole days, den maybe you'll hab yourn. Ole Mistis died 'fo de war, an' ole Massa, he too ole to go. He didn't do nothin' but set aroun' an' read de books an' papers. 'Peer lak to me he jus' plum forgit 'bout young Mistis after her mammy died, an' de little gal jus' growed up lak a wild flower in de woods, cep'n for a handsome young boy on de nex' plantation. Dey was nearly always together.

"By an' by de boy got ole enough to go to de wah. It was jus' a little fo' de close. Den young Mistis, she droop an' she droop. 'Reckley she 'gin to swoon, long jus' anywheres she would. One day she swoon an' nothin' I could do would bring her back to her senses. I jus' couldn't fetch her to. I call ole Massa an' he git a doctor. Dey putt me outten de room an' I ain't neber heard whut dat doctor said till yit, but ole Massa, he gostark wild. He holla an' carry on in his sleep all de night; an' de nex' day he druv' de young Mistis away. Dere was a cabin den in de swamp, an' she went dar to live. I snuk out dar an' tote her vittles to her fo' days an' days. She always grab me an' say: 'Don't you love me an' don't you believe in me, mammy?'"

"'Co'se I does, honey chile, 'ca'se I useta sing to you 'bout de good ole lan' of promise.' Den I says to her: 'Dese times is powerful triflin', an' maybe 'fo' long I's gwine home an' de white folks will miss me 'ca'se dey can't raise chilluns.' Den she cry an' I cry.

"'Bout dat time de word come of de surrender. Ole Massa seem to come to his wits den an' he kep' a close watch on me so's I can't leave de house to carry de food. On de fo'th day, I cotch a chance an' I snuck off. When I come close to de cabin I call, but young Mistis neber answer. Den I went to de do', but I neber go in de do', 'ca'se millions of black wings come a-whirrin' outten de house. I run an' run an' I pray too, but de big black wings still follow me. Sometimes in de early mornin' I still hears an' sees two pairs of wings, sometimes white, sometimes black.

"Yassuh, I is aimin' to tell you 'bout ole Massa; whut 'come of him. One evenin' I ventured to de aide of dat swamp, an' somep'n cracked under my feets. I is jus' about to run when I sees it's jus' a piece of paper. I sees it has writin' on it so I taken it to ole Massa. Den when he read dat he sho 'nough go plum crazy. 'Bout dat time dey open what dey called a 'sane 'sylum in Tusaloosy an' dey taken ole Massa dar an' a little later he died.

"De young boy who went to wah, whut about him? Dey say he was killed in de las' battle of Appomatox. Dat piece o' paper? Yassuh. It was a paper sayin' dat young Mistis and de young boy on de nex' plantation was 'nited in ma'iage. Listen, young Massa. I hears dem quare wings a-whirrin'."